

*i*BECAME A MUSLIM

أصبحت مسلمة

AYSHA PARRY



الدار العالمية للكتاب الإسلامي



IN THE NAME OF

ALLAH

THE ALL-COMPASSIONATE, ALL-MERCIFUL



I Became a Muslim

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CONTENTS

Pronunciation and Transliteration Chart.....	6
Arabic honorific symbols used in this book.....	11
About the word <i>Lord</i>.....	13
Publisher's Note	15
Dedication	17
Introduction.....	21
Chapter 1: Early memories	25
Chapter 2: Spiritual quest	33
Chapter 3: Chaotic Cairo	53
Chapter 4: A way of life.....	65
Chapter 5: What I left behind	83
Chapter 6: The rewards.....	91
Appendix A: Islam quick reference.....	105
Appendix B: The new Muslim	115
Glossary of Islamic Terms.....	121

PRONUNCIATION AND TRANSLITERATION CHART

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
أ	short 'a', as in <i>cat</i>	a
آ - إ	longer 'a', as in <i>cab</i> (not as in <i>cake</i>)	â
ب	/b/ as in <i>bell</i> , <i>rubber</i> and <i>tab</i>	b
ت	/t/ as in <i>tap</i> , <i>mustard</i> and <i>sit</i>	t
ة	takes the sound of the preceding diacritical mark sometimes ending in h (when in pausal form): ah, ih or ooh; or atu(n), ati(n) or ata(n) when uninterrupted	h or t (when followed by another Arabic word)
ث	/th/ as in <i>thing</i> , <i>maths</i> and <i>wealth</i>	th
ج	/j/ as in <i>jam</i> , <i>ajar</i> and <i>age</i>	j
ح	a 'harsher' sound than the English initial /h/, and may occur medially and in word-final position as well	ḥ
خ	as in <i>Bach</i> (in German); may occur initially and medially as well	kh
د	/d/ as in <i>do</i> , <i>muddy</i> and <i>red</i>	d

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
ذ	as in <i>this</i> , <i>father</i> and <i>smooth</i>	dh
ر	/r/ as in <i>raw</i> , <i>arid</i> and <i>war</i> ; may also be a rolled 'r', as pronounced in Spanish	r
ز	/z/ as in <i>zoo</i> , <i>easy</i> and <i>gaze</i>	z
س	/s/ as in <i>so</i> , <i>messy</i> and <i>grass</i>	s
ش	as in <i>ship</i> , <i>ashes</i> and <i>rush</i>	sh
ص	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /sw/ or /s/ farther back in the mouth	ṣ
ض	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /d/ farther back in the mouth	ḍ
ط	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /t/ farther back in the mouth	t
ظ	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing 'the' farther back in the mouth	<u>dh</u>
ع	no close equivalent in English: a guttural sound in the back of the throat	‘
غ	no close equivalent in English, but may be closely approximated by pronouncing it like the French /r/ in 'rouge'	gh
ف	/f/ as in <i>fill</i> , <i>effort</i> and <i>muff</i>	f
ق	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /k/ farther back in the mouth	q

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
ك	/k/ as in <i>king</i> , <i>buckle</i> and <i>tack</i>	k
ل	/l/ as in <i>lap</i> , <i>halo</i> ; in the word <i>Allah</i> , it becomes velarized as in <i>ball</i>	l
م	/m/ as in <i>men</i> , <i>simple</i> and <i>ram</i>	m
ن	/n/ as in <i>net</i> , <i>ant</i> and <i>can</i>	n
هـ - ه - ا	/h/ as in <i>hat</i> ; unlike /h/ in English, in Arabic /h/ is pronounced in medial and word-final positions as well	h
و	as in <i>wet</i> and <i>away</i>	w
و	long 'u', as in <i>boot</i> and <i>too</i>	oo
ي	as in <i>yard</i> and <i>mayo</i>	y
ي	long 'e', as in <i>eat</i> , <i>beef</i> and <i>see</i>	ee
ء	glottal stop: may be closely approximated by pronouncing it like 't' in the Cockney English pronunciation of <i>butter</i> : <i>bu'er</i> , or the stop sound in <i>uh-oh</i> !	(omitted in initial position)

Diphthongs

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
او، َو	long 'o', as in <i>owe</i> , <i>boat</i> and <i>go</i>	au, aw
اي، َي	long 'a', as in <i>aid</i> , <i>rain</i> and <i>say</i>	ay, ai, ei

Diacritical marks (tashkeel)

Name of mark	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
◌َ fathah	very short 'a' or schwa (unstressed vowel)	a
◌ِ kasrah	shorter version of ee or schwa (unstressed vowel)	i

Diacritical marks (tashkeel)

◌ُ ḍammah	shorter version of oo	u
◌ْ shaddah	a doubled consonant is stressed in the word, and the length of the sound is also doubled	double letter
◌◌ sukoon	no vowel sound between consonants or at the end of a word	absence of vowel

ARABIC HONORIFIC SYMBOLS USED IN THIS BOOK

(ﷲ): *Subhânahu wa Ta'âlâ* – Glorified and Exalted is He

(ﷺ): *şalla Allâhu 'alayhi wa sallam* – blessings and peace
be upon him

(ﷺ): *'alayhi as-salâm* – peace be upon him

(ﷺ): *rađiya Allâhu 'anhû* – may Allah be pleased with him

(ﷺ): *rađiya Allâhu 'anhâ* – may Allah be pleased with her

ABOUT THE WORD *LORD*

The word *lord* in English has several related meanings. The original meaning is ‘master’ or ‘ruler’, and in this sense it is often used to refer to human beings: ‘the *lord* of the mansion’ or ‘Lord So-and-So’ (in the United Kingdom, for example). The word *Lord* with a capital L is used in the lexicon of Islam to refer to the One and Only God – Allah. In Islam, there is no ambiguity about the meaning of this word. While it is true that one may occasionally use the word *lord* (whether capitalized or not) to refer to a human being, in Islamic discourse the reference of this term is always clear from the context. Whereas for Christians, Hindus and other polytheists, the word *Lord* with a capital L may refer to Allah, to Jesus or to some imagined deity, for Muslims, there can be no plurality of meaning. Allah alone is the Lord, and the Lord is Allah – not Jesus, not Rama, not any other being.

The Editor

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

All praise and thanks belong to Allah alone, the One, the Almighty and All-Merciful. Blessings and peace be upon Prophet Muhammad, the last of His Messengers and Prophets, and upon his family, his Companions and all those who follow in his footsteps until the end of time.

It is often said that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and that many women, in particular, are embracing the true religion. In this book, one of those women describes her journey towards Islam, beginning right from her childhood in England and continuing through a trip across Europe and Asia, during which she witnessed various religious rituals.

Aysha Parry articulately explains what drew her to embrace Islam and how it brought her peace of mind. Her understanding of Islamic teachings is still evolving, and she is forthright in addressing the changes she has made and the challenges she has faced in adapting not only to a new religion but to a new society. Hers is an inspiring story indeed, which will inshallah motivate potential converts and serve as a heart-warming read for those who are already Muslims.

May Allah accept the efforts of all those who contributed to the production of this book, and may it be acceptable to Him, *âmeen*.

Muhammad Abdul Mohsin Al-Tuwaijri

Managing Director

International Islamic Publishing House

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Dedication

O Allah, I pray that my book pleases you!

To my dear family: Ahmed, Maryam and Omar

*It was perfect, the call from Allah,
A harmonious beckoning: come to prayer, come to success.
Stray away no longer, step on the right path,
A feeling, a sense, the realisation, it was perfect.*

Aysha Parry

INTRODUCTION

I *Became a Muslim* is a personal account of how I reverted to Islam. It also covers my transformation to a new way of life, not only practicing a new religion but leaving my homeland and living in a Middle Eastern Islamic country. For easy reference in one book, I have brought together information about different aspects of Islam for anyone who is thinking of converting or who has recently become a Muslim. Since the world is increasingly curious about Islam, understanding the religion and its people has become even more necessary, and *I Became a Muslim* may also be effective as a general learning guide.

My story begins with my childhood upbringing in a fairly secular Christian environment and moves on to how I reached a point of unhappiness and restlessness. Fortunately, my life did not revolve around any search for artificial experiences like taking drugs or getting drunk; I knew that this life had more value and meaning than that. My mind turned to God frequently, and I knew that I wanted Him to be a part of my life, but I did not know how. The Christian faith and Christians themselves had let me down in many ways, and I felt lost for many years. Hence, my search for God began.

Once I found Islam, I found a purpose in my life. This did not happen overnight, though; it required many days and months of private contemplation. For two years or so, I gathered as much information as I could. I researched books and collected accounts of other people's experiences. I visited the London Central Mosque on a Friday, the day of the main congregational prayer, to get a real sense of what it was like to be a Muslim. There could be no doubt that becoming a Muslim was the right decision and no doubt that this was the right path.

Behind all the effort I put into thinking and knowledge gathering, work of a different kind was going on in the background, tending to every detail so as to make my step across to the straight path gentle and easy. It was, of course, the guidance of Allah (*Subhânahu wa Ta'âlâ* – Glorified and Exalted is He).¹ I had searched for Him, and He picked me up and put me where I needed to be.

﴿... وَاللَّهُ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ﴾

(سورة البقرة: الآية ٢١٣)

﴿...Allah guides whom He wills to a straight path.﴾

(*Qur'an* 2: 213)²

Practicing my new faith was easy and clear. Islam resolved those questions that Christianity had failed to answer. I began to

¹ 'Allah' is the Arabic word for God. It does not imply a god different from that of the Bible; in fact, it is the word used for God in Arabic-language Bibles. Muslims believe that Allah is the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and all the prophets (peace be upon them).

² The translations of the meanings of the verses of the *Qur'an* in this book have been taken (with some changes to the text) from Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Dr. Muhammad Taqi-uddin al-Hilali, *The Noble Qur'an* (Madinah: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an).

learn a whole new set of values, morals and ethics that made complete sense.

Becoming a Muslim, however, was not all easy. There were some very tough times ahead: new habits I had to acquire and old habits I had to let go of. During the early days, I constantly supplicated to Allah, asking for help and strength.

The entire Islamic religion is absolutely fascinating. Nowhere will you find anything like it or even close to it. It is vast, covering every aspect of worship and daily life situations that you can imagine. Reciting and reflecting on the noble Qur'an will keep you busy all your life, and if you were to study other areas of Islamic learning like *Hadith*³ [the collected statements and actions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that with the Qur'an form the basis of Islamic law] and Islamic law, it would probably take a lifetime to become an expert. There is always something new to learn.

As a Muslim, I no longer had to search; I no longer had to worry. All I had to do was just get on board and live life in a way that brought me a deep sense of contentment. Converting to the Islamic religion, moving to an Islamic country, learning the Arabic language, marriage and children...

I think it all started in Egypt...

³ Wherever possible, Arabic terms have been translated into English. In cases where we have chosen to retain the Arabic, the transliterated word or phrase is shown in italics the first time it appears in the text; the term is also defined in the Glossary found at the end of this book. (Editor)

CHAPTER 1

EARLY MEMORIES

Cambridge, England was my birthplace. I was raised in a nearby 1960s London overspill town called Haverhill. From a population of just a few hundred, with a textile factory as the main employer, Haverhill grew steadily over the years to accommodate the arrival of excess Londoners. There were new homes to build and employment to provide, so vast portions of the surrounding agricultural farmland were taken over. After World War II, with its bombing of numerous residential areas in London, the government designated many towns for expansion, especially in East Anglia (Southeast England). This was a good opportunity for some of the Londoners, my parents included, to escape from the ever-growing population of the capital.

Haverhill offered new, affordable rental homes, along with employment and a chance to live in the lush green countryside of Suffolk. Haverhill is in a very fortunate position geographically. The town boasts the Essex and Cambridgeshire counties as neighbours, with Stanstead Airport and London each less than an hour's drive away and major road networks within easy reach.

The town itself is a pleasant place in which to reside. The main part of the town cuts through the land like a valley, with the

high street shops running through the centre. Upon the two low gradient hills on either side of the valley are the ever-expanding housing developments and industrial business areas. All the amenities one needs are available within the town. Still, as a child, I always enjoyed our family shopping days out to nearby larger towns and cities like Bury St. Edmunds, Braintree and my dear favourite – Cambridge.

For many years, Haverhill was made up of just two types of inhabitants: the locals (all of whom seemed to be able to trace their long family history within the town's boundaries) and the 'foreigners' (from London). The joke in town is that when any of the locals finally plan to leave Haverhill even for a day, they begin to feel unwell with worry as they approach the main roundabout that exits the town. They literally drive in a circle around the roundabout to get back inside their town again, not daring to leave!

Today, a good mixture of citizens from near and far have come to live in Haverhill due to its convenient location, increased industrial development and housing that is very affordable when compared with other parts of the country.

Like all my family members, I was christened early, at the age of a few months. My parents decided to christen my brother, my sister and me because it was 'something that must be done'. It was a 'normal' thing to do in our society, where the majority of people were Christians. It did not necessarily mean that you would continue a life of Christian practices and duties; it was more out of fear of what others would say if they found out that you had not baptised your children.

For the rest of my early childhood, the practice of Christianity was almost absent. A Christian education, going to church, reading the Bible, praying or having religious discussions were all non-existent in our family life. Religion was very much a private affair. My parents occasionally uttered the word 'God', and I knew

for sure that He existed, was thought of and was needed in our lives. Yet in my early days, I knew no one who went to church regularly or who would speak openly about religion or God. It was as though discussing God or religion was not an acceptable thing to do.

Virtually all Christians celebrated Christmas – most without giving any thought to its meaning – and our family was no exception. We celebrated together on Christmas Day, going along with all the commercialism of this modern-day custom. The day is supposed to commemorate the birth of Jesus (*‘alayhi as-salâm* – peace be upon him), although his actual birth date is not known; it is celebrated on December 25th in the United Kingdom. Although it is a Christian celebration, it is widely celebrated by non-Christians also.

The same type of celebration happens at Easter, which is the Christian celebration of Jesus’ resurrection after being crucified.⁴ It is supposed to be one of the most sacred Christian celebrations. Today it is celebrated with chocolate ‘Easter eggs’, the size of ostrich eggs, covered with large quantities of unnecessary plastic and cardboard packaging, and hardly a single thought of Jesus.

While growing up, I believed that Christmas meant giving and receiving lots of presents and that Easter meant eating chocolate eggs until our hearts were content. We always had a nice, warm, and loving family time around those events, but as I was growing up, I frequently wondered what it was all about. I also remember wondering, in my own childish way, why we did not acknowledge the religious side of our religious festivals.

⁴ Islam teaches that Jesus was a true prophet of God who was born miraculously of the virgin Mary. Islam teaches, however, that he was fully human, not the divine ‘Son of God’, and that he was not in fact crucified and resurrected. Instead, he was raised up by God and will return before the end of time.

I felt confused sometimes, but I was too young to understand and question things seriously.

My primary school encouraged a few Christian practices. For about half an hour, in the morning assemblies, we would sing Christian songs to the clanging of an enthusiastic pianist. We sang songs such as: “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”, “Praise Him, Praise Him”, and “We Plough the Fields and Scatter”.

Every September, we attended a church service for the annual celebration of the Harvest Festival. Thanksgiving ceremonies were held in participating churches and involved singing, praying and decorating the church with the foods and fruits that each family was asked to donate.

The Harvest Festival is at the time of year when the crops have been harvested from the land in the local area and special ‘thanks to God’ are given for the supply of cereals, vegetables and fruits. (Ironically, nearly all food donations were given in the form of food in a tin can.) I remember attending the Harvest Festival at a very young age and enjoying having all my school friends in the church. As we prayed (with hands together in front and eyes closed), many of us would leave an eye half open to see if the others had their eyes closed and were praying.

At Christmas, the school organised a nativity play, and Mums and Dads would come to watch their children dressed in costumes, acting out the biblical story of the birth of Jesus. Some children acted as angels or the three wise men; some even dressed up as donkeys or camels. A child’s doll usually represented the baby Jesus.

I had never had the experience of going to church regularly with my family; it was something we did not discuss much, did not have time for and just did not feel the need to do.

There are half a dozen or so beautiful old churches in my hometown. The stunning town-centre St. Mary’s Church was where I was christened back in 1972. Many of the town’s weddings take

place there; when I was a child, I remember crowds gathering to watch the beautifully-dressed brides and guests arrive for Saturday afternoon weddings. The townsfolk would admire the costly spectacle until the wedding party disappeared into the church to complete the traditions of the Christian wedding.

By the time I was in middle school, at around the age of 10, I had a brief friendship with an Irish girl; we would spend time together both inside and outside school. Her family was Catholic; my family, like many in England, belonged to the Anglican Church. Every Sunday, she went with her family to the Catholic Church situated in our town, and she frequently invited me to come along. I wanted to go – not only because she was my friend and I wanted to be with her, but also because I was intrigued. I asked my mother if I could go to church one Sunday morning with my friend. My mother asked me what church it was and then answered me with a firm: “No. You are not going.” And that was that. I felt a bit disappointed, but soon I forgot about church and religion for the next couple of years.

We moved to another house, still in Haverhill, and I changed to Upper School at the age of 12; this led me to become friends with two of the nicest girls I have ever known. They were twins. We were the same age, in the same grouping at school, and we lived just one street away from each other. We spent a lot of time together, doing all the kinds of things that young girls do: being together, playing games, listening to music, shopping in town and doing homework.

The twins and their family were practicing Christians who went to an Anglican church every Sunday. It was not long before I was asking again if I could go to church with them. This time, my mother agreed.

The Old Independent, their church, was on the other side of town from where we lived. There we spent the first part of the morning service with the adults in the main church hall, singing

hymns, saying prayers and listening to the vicar's weekly speech. In the second half of the service, the children under sixteen would be led to the back room for Sunday school while the adults stayed in the main hall for the remainder of their service.

In Sunday school, the teacher would read us stories from the Bible, and we would discuss what we learned. Sometimes we would act out small stories from the Bible.

At church services, I felt very uncomfortable singing the hymns, some of which were written hundreds of years ago and often in the 'old English language' style. To sing most of them required an impossibly high voice, and they were accompanied by a heavy drone that billowed out of the organ. Depending on the hymn, it sometimes sounded quite depressing. I admit that I used to just mouth the words, not daring to make a sound because I knew that my singing voice was terribly out of tune, and I did not want anyone laughing or complaining about me. Even up until the very last time I attended a church service (shortly before I converted to Islam), I was still doing this.

Having said all that, I enjoyed going to church very much. For the next few years, I attended the Old Independent Church with my friends, the twins.

During one Sunday school lesson, the vicar asked if I would write a speech about something that meant a lot to me, something that could be read out to the congregation to get them all thinking. I agreed, feeling rather pleased that he had asked me. I wanted to write about the starvation in Ethiopia, which was at its worst at this time and was constantly on the television news programmes. I wrote about the difficulties of the people there and about why we should think of them and help them as much as we could by giving to charity, and I encouraged everyone to pray for those who were less fortunate. My mother helped me with this project, and together we composed the speech as a poem.

One Sunday, the parishioners who attended other Old Independent Churches in the local area gathered together in one church, and I was asked to read my poem aloud during the service. I was happy to do so, although I was extremely uneasy because the church was absolutely full of people. My mother came to this service also. This was a special time and a happy event for me. I felt like I was a part of something important, believing that I was doing something good, however small. I wanted my audience to understand my words and to feel compassion for those affected by the disastrous situation in Africa. My hope was that maybe the words would encourage a few in the congregation to help the underprivileged and neglected people in our world.

The christening of my niece and nephew at the St. Mary's Church in Haverhill was a rare occasion when all our family members were brought together for a religious ceremony. My sister and her husband asked my brother and me if we would be 'godparents' ('godfather' and 'godmother' respectively) to their son and daughter. We both agreed, and again I felt delighted to be a part of something important. Unfortunately, like a lot of Christian practices, the requirement for godparents often just nominally completes part of a tradition; many of those involved do not fully understand their responsibilities or even give them much thought.

At the time my niece and nephew were baptised, I did not fully understand my obligations either. In fact, the main duties of being a godparent are to take responsibility for the child if (God forbid) the child's parents die and to make sure that the child is educated as a Christian. Looking back, I know that if I had in any way tried to fulfil this duty and promise to God by arranging a Christian education for my niece and nephew, my ideas and efforts would have been shunned right from the start. I probably would have been told not to interfere in such matters. Today, for a large majority of Christians, being a godparent is more of a symbolic gesture than something that they will actually carry out.

As I was growing up, I remember a common question and conversation starter among friends. “Do you believe in God?” was the question, and a common reply was: “Not really.” Other replies included: “Sometimes I do,” “I used to,” or the popular “No, I don’t.” It seemed fashionable to say that you did not believe in God, just to see what kind of reaction you would get for this controversial answer. A good guess is that most ‘Christians’ do believe in God –but only at a distance or when times are hard or some kind of help is needed. The plea “God help me” or “God help us” is always said in times of real trouble. When the going is good, though, many have relegated God to the back of their minds, thinking that there is no need for any thanks or appreciation directed to Him.

I cannot say exactly why I wanted to go to church regularly when I was young; no one from my family was doing so, and nobody was forcing me to, either. Although most of the churches are beautifully designed buildings, their interior is usually very cold, damp and dusty.

I cannot explain why as a child, I often felt that I wanted to pray to and think about God. I did not even know how to pray correctly. I knew the Lord’s Prayer (the main prayer in Christianity), which I had learned in primary school and used in the few church services I had attended. But occasionally I felt the need to talk to God, and I did not know how, or who to ask; I felt shy and embarrassed to ask anyone.

At a young age, I was aware of a pull towards God, with no persuasion from anyone. I was gently attracted to the church, and slowly guided along the path to God. I was made consciously aware of Him.

I believe that this was purely His guidance.

CHAPTER 2

SPIRITUAL QUEST

The subtle tugs I occasionally received, inviting me to follow a path to God, were not strong enough to persuade me to go to church every Sunday or to regularly read the Bible or learn more about my Christian faith. It seemed that there was no need to put religion first in my life at that time. I was doing other things. I was growing up, making a life for myself with my home and job, and trying to overcome all the difficulties and financial worries that life threw at me.

Several years passed before I started to think seriously about my religion – not only think about it, but question it deeply and finally do something about it. I had spent my childhood without questioning my faith – just accepting it unconditionally and then pushing it to the back of my mind. The thought of other religions being out there was a million miles away from my mind.

The next seventeen years were filled with a mixture of both happy and sad experiences. I met some good people over the years and made some fine friends both inside and outside of work. On the other hand, I also became acquainted with some appalling characters and was subjected to some terribly cruel and spiteful acts; even those who were supposed to be close to me often broke

and tore at my heart. I remember some events well and continually try my hardest to forget others.

When I reached my early thirties, I felt genuinely ready to delve deep into my faith and find answers to some questions that had crept into my head. I wanted to change and break away from a lifestyle that I knew was wrong for me. I was irritated by living alone and being single. Each and every day centred around going out to work in order to provide myself with money to support a lifestyle that I was not even happy with.

There was a huge void in my existence, and it bothered me. As things stood, my life seemed pointless; there were no colours and few sparkles. It was time for things to change. I remember spending one entire day hopelessly worrying about my life, not knowing what I could do for myself. I just sat on a chair close to a window in my home and motionlessly stared up at the sky literally for hours and hours, thinking, searching for a solution and watching the clouds go by.

A severe bout of tonsillitis kept me away from work for two long weeks. I stayed at home, curled up on the sofa and surrounded by food, drinks and medicines, with only the television for company. While I was recovering, I spent a lot of time watching daytime television and was happy to catch a series of documentaries on ancient Egypt, a topic in which I had long had an interest.

Every afternoon I watched programmes featuring various topics – the desert, the pyramids, Tutankhamen, the Nile, mummies, dung beetles, and Cleopatra, to name just a few. As one documentary would end and I would plan on getting up and about for a bit of exercise, another ancient Egyptian programme would start. I hardly moved for hours as I absorbed the history lessons; they left me feeling mesmerized and longing for Egypt more than ever.

Soon after recovering, I found myself in the fortunate position of being able to take a holiday, the first such chance that

I had had in years. I knew exactly where I wanted to go. I wanted to go to Egypt. Since my school days, I had always had a fascination with Egypt. Ancient Egypt had a wonderfully rich and mysterious history; it possessed a magnetism I could not resist any longer. My plan was to visit the pyramids and the Great Sphinx at Giza, then the Tutankhamen exhibit at the Egyptian Museum in downtown Cairo. This was the starting point of many things that were to change in my life.

Near the end of summer in 2005, I had my holiday booked. The travel agent thought I was completely mad to visit Egypt at the end of August, when even the Egyptians themselves do not venture outside much because of the extreme heat. I did not care about that one bit; I was going to Egypt – it was all booked, and that was that.

My hotel was in Giza, very close to the pyramids. I will never forget my first morning there. After breakfast, I took a little stroll around the swimming pool to think over what I could do that day. By around 9:30 a.m., the sun's rays were beaming down, and it was already getting hot. I sat down for a bit to enjoy the quietness of the pool and the hotel surroundings. I looked up at the sky and, to my amazement, there right in front of me was a great big pyramid. It took my breath away, and I was in awe. The pyramid was some distance away from the hotel, yet it was colossal. I just could not take my eyes off it, so I decided right away that I would visit the pyramids that morning.

Spending the day at the pyramids was an extraordinary experience, one which I will reminisce about forever. I took the long, hot and dusty walk from the hotel to the pyramids in order to experience more of Giza on foot than I could from a taxi. I pondered the pyramids as they got closer and closer. Seeing the pyramids for real was overwhelming and far superior to viewing them on television or in books.

At the Giza necropolis, I felt the awesome presence of the pyramids. First I chose a camel ride to enjoy my time around the pyramids, not wanting to miss that opportunity. I was pulled along by an enthusiastic camel master for a bumpy ride out into the surrounding desert. I took photos of panoramic views of the three large pyramids, Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure, and of the adjoining little baby pyramids known as 'the Queens'.

Afterwards, I wandered around the majestic structures on foot and sat in the scorching midday sun for a bit, drinking Fanta and gazing up at the nose-less Sphinx. Papyrus shops, perfume shops and carpet shops were all part of the ancient Egyptian experience, and I adored every minute of it.

The following day, I strolled around the Egyptian Museum marvelling at the thousands of artefacts and soaking up the magnificence of it all.

The rest of my stay was spent sitting around the hotel pool in the shade, taking it easy, writing in my journal, and most of all thinking. Relaxing in front of the pool and the pyramid, I began to hear a kind of chant in the air. It was an incredibly beautiful sound, and I became totally alert as my ears strained to absorb its harmony. I did not understand the words or their exact purpose, but I realised that it was coming from a nearby mosque.

Later I learned that this was the Islamic call to prayer. The call to prayer touched something inside me that day, and I became captivated. I wanted to find out more. Islam, mosques and Muslims were completely alien to me, but my new goal was to search, learn and understand all about Islam. I returned home almost more excited than I had been when I left for Egypt.

I explored the Internet to find what I could on Islam; I also spent some time in the town library. I wanted to do more than just read, though; I wanted to actually see and hear and be a part of what I was reading.

One Friday I travelled to visit the London Central Mosque, also known as the Islamic Cultural Centre, situated in central North London. I dressed in what I thought was the appropriate attire: decently covered body, complete with a piece of black material draped over my head.

After entering the grounds of the mosque, I had no idea where to go or what to do, but before long I was guided by friendly staff. Upstairs, I entered the ladies' section of the mosque; to my amazement, I found what appeared to be hundreds of women, some in the washroom and others sitting on the balcony overlooking the main hall, waiting for the prayers to begin. It was inspiring to see such a turnout.

Even though I was dressed correctly, I must have stood out from the crowd, looking like I had no clue what to do. A lady came over to help me. She was originally from Turkey and had settled in London for a new life with her English husband. She offered to show me how to wash for prayer and then invited me to sit beside her throughout the whole service. She was kind and supportive. After the prayers were finished, she took me to meet someone from the Islamic Centre's education department, where I was given some literature on Islam. This was a great start, and I went away with a memorable experience and plenty to read.

I had enjoyed Egypt so much that I travelled there several more times. I remember getting off the plane on one occasion, smelling the sweet thick air of Cairo and saying to myself: "I am home." Little did I know that in just a year's time, I would leave England and start a new life in the place that I had come to love the most – Egypt.

Around this time, I frequently found myself deep in thought about religion. The more I thought about Christian teachings and practices, the more I realized that they were losing their significance for me. Nothing made any sense, and there were too many

contradictions. I even bought a few 'Bible-help' books, to double-check that I was not missing something somewhere. I began to feel that the Christian faith was wrong for me.

A Christian friend once explained to me the reason that I (like so many other people) had great difficulty in reading and understanding the Bible, saying: "It's because the Bible is mostly made up of metaphors involving figures of speech or symbolism not literally representing real things. If, for example, you read a page in the Bible searching for an answer and you don't find it, just turn a few pages more and read, and you might find your answer there."

Well, that was the end of my Bible reading days. I put the book back on the table in front of me and looked at it sadly. It was of no use to me now. God was so important to me that just giving up and becoming a nonbeliever was completely out of question. I believed in God, but not in the same way that most Christians believe.

In a drastic measure, I gave up my job and decided to spend the next six months travelling. I wanted a worldly education and worldly experiences. I wanted to come into contact with other religions and see how other people lived. I wanted to appreciate the natural wonders of the world. Most importantly, I wanted to be grateful to God and recognise the value of my life.

My travels took me across Europe, Turkey, India, Nepal, Tibet, China and Laos, as I visited some of the most thought-provoking religious places on earth. I chose to travel with a company that specialised in 'over-landing' (no air travel, only land or sea) trips in a converted truck-style bus with around thirty other people. Our journey was to start in London, taking us through twenty countries on three continents and finally ending in Sydney, Australia about six months later. It was the first journey of its kind.

Packing clothes and necessities for this kind of journey was an almost impossible task for me. Due to my inexperience with over-land travel, I had no idea what to take with me or what to leave

behind. I became known by the other travellers in the group as the lady with the extremely heavy rucksack.

Two essential items that most of us had among our belongings were a mobile phone and an iPod. One lady took her knitting along and made many scarves for her fellow travellers, while one of the men insisted on keeping a large stash of alcohol, which he replenished every couple of days, tucked away under one of the seats. The oldest man in our group, who was over sixty, kept us all informed of our altitude and the temperature, using a handy electronic gadget that he played with continuously.

We were a group of men and women of various ages; most came from various parts of the United Kingdom, but a few others joined us from other countries. We all got along with each other very well and became good friends shortly into our trip. It could not have been otherwise, considering that we would be travelling together for six months. We helped each other with our tents, enjoyed our sightseeing together and took turns preparing meals.

I found cooking on a large scale to be quite a struggle; in fact, I did not enjoy that part one bit. Each day, a rotating group of six people would be in charge of cooking for the group, clearing away the dishes, and cleaning the portable kitchen that was added to the side of the truck.

On the whole, the journey was a tough one, but it was a once in a lifetime opportunity for me to see a large part of the world. The general plan of the trip was to drive hundreds of miles during the day to reach our destinations in each country, resting only in the late evening and sleeping in our tents at night. Once we found towns on our routes, we enjoyed the luxury of booking into hotels and spending some time resting or sightseeing.

Some of the younger people in our group were not planning to return to the United Kingdom; they wanted to find work in Australia or New Zealand and begin new lives there. Two members

of the group married after the trip and started a family, and they also chose to stay in Australia. It was an eventful expedition, with many of us searching for new paths to take in our lives.

We travelled the shortest route possible through France, Belgium and Germany, heading for the Czech Republic. It took us several days of virtually non-stop driving before we reached one of the first sightseeing stops: the peculiar 'Church of Bones' situated in the small town of Sedlec in the Czech Republic. The church's strange history began long ago in 1278, when the Abbot of Sedlec travelled to Palestine; upon his return, he sprinkled over the church grounds some 'holy' earth that he had collected there. The locals declared the church sacred, and it became a popular choice as a final resting place. The ossuary contains the remains of approximately forty thousand people that were dug up from the graveyard surrounding the church. In 1870, a Czech woodcarver was given the task of assembling all the bones inside the Church, making what has become its main tourist attraction.

Inside, as I slowly made my way around the morbid ossuary, I witnessed thousands of human bones meticulously arranged in artistic decoration, two monstrances⁵ placed at either side of the altar, and a coat of arms made out of human bones. Human skulls displaying their haunting, vacant looks were piled up high against walls and exhibited in various places around the church. Hanging in the central area was even a chandelier containing at least one of every type of bone in the human body. An eerie atmosphere of death filled the room.

After our group departed from the church, we were left with a strange, sombre feeling and were pretty quiet for some time.

⁵ A monstrance is a cup, usually made of silver or gold, which holds the host (a piece of bread believed to be the body of Christ) and is raised up and displayed by the priest during the Catholic mass. (Editor)

Our next stop in the Czech Republic was the capital city, Prague. We spent a short time here, and the most interesting sight for me was Charles Bridge. Thirty Baroque statues were positioned along both sides of the bridge. Each statue depicted various saints from the Christian religion, including a statue of the lamentation of Christ, the Madonna and the Crucifix and Calvary. Some people refer to this bridge as beautiful and romantic, while others believe it brings good luck to those who touch one of its statues. An old legend about the bridge says that egg yolks were used in the mortar to strengthen its construction.

Our journey continued through the beautiful countries of Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, where we stopped occasionally to enjoy what their cities and rural areas had to offer.

Forging ahead, we left the cold weather of Europe and entered Asia in search of a warmer climate. Istanbul, Turkey, which straddles the two continents, was of special interest to me because of my new curiosity about Islam. I especially enjoyed visiting one of the most beautiful mosques in the world: the Blue Mosque. Inside, the high domes were exquisitely decorated with more than twenty thousand blue tiles adorned with flowers, trees and geometric patterns. The mosque was just as dramatic outside as it was inside, especially at night. Coloured floodlights brilliantly illuminated the mosque, where I observed fifty or so birds swirling around the minarets with a backdrop of black sky and full moon, making a spectacular sight.

My favourite memory of Turkey, though, was spending the night at a campsite high up in the hills south of Ankara. It was an extremely cold night, so cold that ice formed on our tents. As I lay inside my cosy sleeping bag and settled down for the night, the call to prayer came from a far-away mosque. The sound was lovely as the harmonious voice bounced off the distant mountains. Again, I felt something strong inside me; I felt sure that converting to

Islam and becoming a Muslim was the right thing to do. As I lay in my tent, drifting off to sleep, I thought about how and when I was going to convert.

After passing through other countries, we reached India. Travelling through India was at times quite unbelievable – what a cultural shock we had. “Take care not to harm any cows you may come across, because they have complete right of way over everyone else including transport; the cows here are considered sacred by the Hindus,” our tour guide told us. I saw many cows quite happily wandering along the roads while a backlog of traffic piled up behind them, with vehicles only overtaking them gingerly when there was room.

I was wide-eyed pretty much the whole time we were in India. In the remote areas, the poverty was sickening to witness. There were filthy living conditions, grimy looking children and many deformed beggars roaming the streets. Oddly, many of them, especially the children, were always willing to smile and laugh and say hello to the passing foreigners. I realise that half the time, they just wanted to see what we would give them, but considering the conditions they were living in, I just do not know how they could produce the most beautiful smiles I have ever seen.

Another animal that is seen all over India in vast numbers is the monkey, which also has a sacred status. In the Hindu religion, monkeys are believed to be manifestations of the monkey god, Hanuman. They are found in most public places, especially where there are plenty of tourists who find it amusing to share their food with them. Many Hindus regularly feed the monkeys also, and this encourages their rapid population growth.

The Golden Temple, located in Amritsar, was an astonishing place. This Sikh holy temple was open to all visitors; we just had to remove our shoes and cover our heads before entering. The magnificent sight before us of the glistening Golden Temple, set in

the middle of a lake and literally covered in gold, brought needed beauty to our eyes. The floors circling the concourse were extremely hot to walk on barefoot, as the sun heated up the marble, but the chanting of prayers, accompanied by drumbeats, rhythmically carried us along. We watched pilgrims immerse themselves in the lake, symbolically cleansing their souls.

The most humbling experience was inside the temple's kitchens and dormitories. Any visitor, irrespective of race, religion, or gender, can sleep and eat here for free. Pilgrims volunteer in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning for an astonishing thirty thousand visitors a day. The meal consists of a simple but enjoyable vegetarian curry and lentil dish, served with bread. One can only imagine the huge food bill, but the expenses are met by the temple funds. What awe-inspiring kindness – to provide the most basic needs to humanity: food and shelter.

In one Indian restaurant, an employee welcomed visitors by using his thumb to smear a large red dot of sandalwood paste onto the foreheads of all those passing through its doors. We were all rather startled by this amusing gesture; called a 'tilaka' in the Hindu religion, the dot symbolises one's 'third eye' and usually indicates which tradition a Hindu follows. As we sat down at our tables, we laughed at each other's new appearances, and many of the girls headed straight for the toilets to wash it off. It was an unexpected and unique way of welcoming tourists into a restaurant and putting the customers in light-hearted moods.

The northern city of Dharamsala in the Kangra Valley is just a stone's throw away from the Himalayan mountain range and is home to the Tibetan exile community, including the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists. The Dalai Lamas are believed to be the manifestations of Avalokitesvara – the Buddha of Compassion, who chose to be reborn in order to enlighten others. Today's fourteenth Dalai Lama is considered to be the reincarnation

of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, the thirteenth having been the reincarnation of the twelfth Dalai Lama, and so on. Their Namgyal monastery teaches Buddhist Sutra and Tantra texts as well as ritual practices, Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan crafts.

Around the main part of Dharamsala, we saw two types of people that stood out from the crowds: Buddhists and tourists, and lots of them. Hundreds of men with shaven heads and dark red robes made their way through the main street heading for the monastery, and just as many tourists followed them. They had determined looks on their faces, most hoping that the Dalai Lama was in residence and that they would get a glimpse of him or have the privilege of listening to one of his speeches. A famous quote from the current Dalai Lama is: “The purpose of our lives is to be happy.”

After arriving in Agra, we were all excited about seeing one of the Seven Wonders of the World – the Taj Mahal. I wanted to explore this magnificent structure and its grounds alone to take time over its beauty, instead of tagging along with thirty other wandering sightseers. I decided on a cool, early morning visit, beginning my tour around the tranquil gardens, taking photos, hardly believing that I was right in front of one of the most beautiful structures in the entire world. I gazed at its exquisite perfection and reflected over its amazing facts.

Completed in 1653, the tomb took twenty-two years to build, using around twenty thousand workers and the power of one thousand elephants. It was constructed on the orders of Shah Jahan, who dedicated the building to his favourite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. As she took her last breath, he promised her that in her memory he would build the most beautiful monument.⁶

⁶ While the Taj Mahal was built by a Muslim ruler, it is in fact an un-Islamic practice to build elaborate, raised tombs over graves. Islam allows only the simplest of markers to be placed over graves, in order to avoid extravagance as well as veneration of shrines. (Author)

In addition to the facts, there are also many legends about the Taj Mahal. One particularly horrifying story still told today in India is that Shah Jahan ordered the hands of all the workers to be cut off so that no one could replicate the tomb anywhere else on earth. Another legend has it that after Mumtaz Mahal's death, Shah Jahan locked himself in his room and refused to eat for eight days. When he surfaced from his isolation, his black beard had turned completely white.

My favourite parts of the Taj Mahal were the Arabic inscriptions of verses from the Qur'an that were used to decorate the mausoleum. The delicate calligraphy of the ninety-nine names of Allah (ﷻ) inscribed around the sides of Mumtaz Mahal's cenotaph was particularly moving.

One of the worst places I ever visited on my travels was the River Ganges at Varanasi. Referred to as the 'Holy City of India', it is visited by Hindus and Buddhists making their pilgrimage. It is also popular among tourists and travellers.

Hundreds of temples and cremation sites are crowded along this part of one of the dirtiest rivers in the world. Industrial and human wastes are poured into this sloppy brown broth, where I found hundreds of men, women and children bathing, washing their clothes, drinking and cleansing their souls. A man began his bath quite naturally, standing in the river having a shave.

My friends and I took a sunrise boat trip on the Ganges (as most tourists do); it was the first time that I saw a dead body. Bloated, stiff and partially rotting, it attracted a bird that pecked at it for its breakfast. The corpse gently bobbed up and down with the water as it floated past us. A few minutes later, the sacred waters showed us a rotting arm and a dead cow. A passenger on our boat eagerly took photographs of the remains before they were softly carried away by the water.

Hindus who cannot afford to be cremated are usually set adrift in the River Ganges. Others are cremated at the numerous places for funeral pyres along its shores, and their ashes are ceremoniously immersed in the river.

After our disturbing boat tour on the mucky waters, we climbed the riverside steps to a temple, from which we viewed the sunrise over the Ganges. The cremations below us billowed out their thick smoke, and all anyone here could do was just breathe in and out the ashes of the dead. An elderly woman offered me a cup of tea made with water from the Ganges. She put the dirty chipped cup directly into my hands before I could decline her kind offer. Her eyes glared at me as if she was thinking, “Will she drink it, or won’t she?” I am sure the tea was very tasty, but I refused and quickly left the temple.

As a perfect complement to the polluted river, the streets of Varanasi were just as bad. A noisy confusion of filthy, smelly alleyways, splattered with cow paddies and mouthfuls of spit, it made the sightseeing experience distasteful, to say the least. Our stop here was a brief one, then off we went in search of cleaner air to breathe.

In contrast, Nepal was filled with stunning natural beauty that surrounded us wherever we went. At the Royal Chitwan National Park, we lodged for the night and took an early morning jungle safari in search of crocodiles, rhinoceroses, and especially the elusive Bengal tigers. We were surrounded by lush vegetation and many unforeseen creatures lurking in the bushes, like the giant frog which sat at the end of my bed patiently waiting for me to notice him. Although I was quite prepared to go in search of tigers and crocodiles, I screamed at the sight of this frog – which was literally the size of a football – in my room.

Nepal’s capital, Kathmandu, was a bustling mixture of people, shops, restaurants, bars, guesthouses, temples, palaces and rickshaws.

One intriguing place I visited, close to the Durbar Square temple and palace complex, was the exquisite wooden carved palace known as the Kumari Ghar. It is home to the ‘living goddess’ Kumari Devi, who is worshiped by Hindus and Nepali Buddhists alike. The Kumari Devi is believed to be the incarnation of the goddess Taleju, who declared that she resides in all female living beings in this universe, as written in the Shakta Hinduism text.

Buddhist monks select the ‘living goddess’ from the Nepali Buddhist community. A selection of young girls from the ages of around four to seven are put through a series of tests and rituals, one of which involves placing them in a dark room filled with the slaughtered heads of goats and buffaloes, lit only by candlelight. If a child shows no fear at this time, it proves she has the fearless quality of a ‘goddess’. Once a Kumari is chosen, she is purified by priests who cleanse her body and spirit in a number of secret Tantric rituals. The ‘living goddess’ leaves the palace only on ceremonial occasions. As soon as she starts to menstruate, she is no longer regarded as a goddess, so a new selection process begins to find the next ‘living goddess’.

Around many of the temples in Kathmandu were street sellers offering various fruits such as coconuts and lemons, garlands of vibrantly coloured flowers, ghee and perfumed oils; many of the items were wrapped up in banana leaves, ready to be given by Hindu worshippers as offerings to the ‘gods’ inside the temples.

Kathmandu attracts many visitors from around the world because it has so much to offer in terms of adventurous activities in its vast mountainous surroundings; these include trekking and rock climbing, kayaking and mountain biking, bungee jumping and helicopter rides, to name a few. Young adults are attracted to the city’s relaxed atmosphere in terms of alcohol, bars, nightclubs, and drugs.

Many of the drug dealers openly offer their drugs for sale to passersby in the street. I was approached by one such dealer who

showed me a collection of bits and pieces he kept in his tight grasp and said, “Hey, you look like you need some drugs.” I wondered if he used such a blatant sales pitch on all of his targets!

Nepal’s natural beauty led us over the border onto the Tibetan side of Mount Everest, the ‘top of the world’. We did not climb the mountain but admired its chiselled icy handsomeness from a short distance away.

By this time, I had become quite ill, due to altitude sickness and the lack of decent food and drinking water. It was incredibly cold, with daytime temperatures around -5°C (23°F). I was constantly tired and very weak. I almost had to drag myself off our truck to take photos of Mount Everest; in a rotten mood because of my fragility, I was quoted as saying, “It’s not as good as the pyramids.”

I do regret saying that now because Mount Everest is one of God’s creations, and it is an awesome sight. The Tibetans refer to the mountain as the goddess mother of the world (Chomolungma), and the Nepalese call it the goddess of the sky (Sagarmatha).

Besides gazing at Mount Everest and collecting photographs, we sat in a tarpaulin-covered tea house sipping butter tea. Made from tea, yak butter and salt, it was, quite simply, disgusting. However, it provided a great deal of calorific energy, which was needed at that high altitude.

Travelling across the endless barren land of Tibet, we would occasionally catch a glimpse of its inhabitants, who wrapped themselves in many layers of ultra-thick clothing as was suitable for their harsh climate. Their faces were dirty-looking and bright red, largely due to their outdoor lifestyle and exposure to abrasive winds, combined with the sun’s scorching rays, which caused the deepest set wrinkles I have ever seen. Along with their hunched backs, this made many of them, including the children, look much older than they probably were.

The Tibetans in traditional, rural areas take part in bathing festivals. An annual bathing festival is usually celebrated in the seventh Tibetan month; it is believed that when the planet Venus is visible in the sky, bathing in the rivers will increase health and wash away sins. Tibetans also usually take part in bathing rituals at three significant times in their life: birth, marriage and death. Tibetan traditions hold that one should not bathe unceremoniously.

Throughout Nepal and Tibet, there are many organisations offering health development programs that teach about and promote personal hygiene to the inhabitants of the area, regardless of what religion they follow, thus helping to prevent sickness and common illnesses which are widely known in this area of the world.

Hanging in many places over the Tibetan land were hundreds of thousands of prayer flags tied across roads, buildings, temples and mountain ridges. Each coloured piece of cloth contained Buddhist mantras that were left to the wind in the belief that they would bring ‘benefits’ to the surrounding land and would ‘purify the air’.

The Tibetans welcomed us as travellers in their land with a friendly curiosity, many staring at us in disbelief as though we were strange and peculiar; they had a look about them that said, “What on earth are you doing here?” We looked back at them in exactly the same manner.

We enjoyed sightseeing in one of the highest cities in the world. At an altitude of 11,450 feet above sea level, the Tibetan capital Lhasa is known as ‘The Heart of Tibet’ and the ‘Forbidden City’. For many years, it was restricted to Buddhists and residents; tourists and travellers were not permitted to enter. We visited the Potala Palace, once home to the Dalai Lama, which has been converted into a museum.

On the road again, we travelled through the southern part of China. My health was deteriorating rapidly, and I was losing a

lot of weight. Unfortunately, the organisers of our trip were rather inexperienced when it came to sorting out our Chinese visas and permits. After losing a lot of time and money, we ended up driving almost non-stop through the Yunnan Province as quickly as we could. With our visas nearing their expiry date, we headed for the country of Laos to avoid paying hefty fines. It was such a waste of time, but all we could do was view this small part of China through the windows of our truck.

The province showed us neat, clean and green-terraced rice paddies; distant mist-covered hills dotted with brightly coloured homes; and curved rooftops, which surrounded us throughout our drive. At one particularly frustrating stop at a restaurant we came across, we were unable to communicate to the local people what we wanted to eat from the menu, which was written in Chinese. They knew no English, and we knew no Chinese. After an exchange of misunderstood words and hand gestures, the kitchen staff busied themselves preparing a lunch of pale, watery pork soup mixed with even more pale-looking unidentified vegetables. If I had not been so hungry, I would have taken the soup back where it came from and chewed on leaves and grass for lunch instead.

Once we arrived in Laos, our first destination was the city of Luang Prabang, and this was to be the end of my travels with the group. At this stage, all I was interested in was finding some very good food to eat and locating the nearest airport so that I could get back home. I had reached a point in my travels where I thought that I really had seen enough of the world for now. I had grown tired of charging through countries as a homeless tourist. I did not seem to be enjoying it as I should have, like the others in the group were. I wanted to go home to England. I wanted to see my parents again.

Within a couple of days, I had gained a little strength. I flew back to England, leaving the rest of the group to continue the

journey down to Australia. I was disappointed about not completing the trip with the others, but I just was not strong enough to keep going; my health was much more important.

I had enjoyed visiting the religious sites on our journey. I had learned a lot about what people believe in, how people behave within their religions, and what they hold sacred in their hearts. Still, the only religion I connected with was Islam; I did not understand the point of the other religions at all. I could find no way that any religion other than Islam could fit into my life and essentially be my life. I respected all the places of worship I had the privilege of seeing, and I admired how different cultures tenderly offered their prayers and sacrifices to whatever it was that they believed in. Their worshipping many different gods or no god at all, or believing that animals hold sacred status, among other religious variations, did not lead me to do anything more than merely view the mixture of rituals, temples, shrines, churches and other places of worship from the perspective of an open-minded bystander.

Before I even embarked on my long and difficult trip, I had already received the most powerful religious beckoning: Allah's 'call to prayer'. I need not have taken the journey if my only aim was to be convinced of the true religious path. Yet I returned with experience and knowledge that I would not have gained had I simply read books about these places instead of actually visiting them. At the beginning of my travels, it seemed like it was a journey I had to take; by the end of it, I was exhausted but left with a feeling that there was still something I needed to do. I did not know what it was exactly, but the religion of Islam was at the forefront of my mind.

I said my goodbyes and parted from my friends, ending my worldly travels in Laos. As I headed for home, I was reminded of an intriguing quotation that had once caught my eye in a newspaper:

When you are sick in mind, go to the sea

When you are sick in body, go to the mountains

When you are sick in spirit, go to the desert.

Anonymous

I had been to the sea in my previous travels, and now I had visited the world's highest mountain, but still it was the desert that played on my mind, beckoning me to return once again. First, though, I went home to England to rest; there, my mother and father looked after me and helped me get well again.

CHAPTER 3

CHAOTIC CAIRO

I said my goodbyes to England in 2007 and headed for the Islamic country of Egypt. For many reasons, I could no longer live happily in my birthplace; however, the main reason I settled on a new life in Cairo was to be among other Muslims and practice my religion. Living in Cairo, rather than just visiting, was of course a very different situation, and I had to learn and adapt to more than I realised: a new culture, different weather, a difficult language and writing system and much lower living standards.

After having lived in Egypt for a few years, I recognise that the country's best asset is its rich and ancient history of excavated treasures, tombs, statues, and pyramids that are found all over the country from as far as Alexandria, dotted along the River Nile in various locations, and right down to the Upper Egyptian city of Aswan. Its ancient history attracts millions of visitors from all over the world every year, but so too do its beautiful and unspoiled sunny beaches, deep-sea diving areas, and the exquisite Islamic buildings of 'Old Cairo' that are visited and appreciated by many.

Out of the rich and never-ending supply of ancient Egyptian artefacts discovered, and all the possible new discoveries yet to come, the pyramids of Giza are my favourite because they demonstrate

the magnificent architectural achievements of ancient Egyptians. No other manmade structure anywhere in the world delights me more. I could visit the necropolis over and over again and never become bored with the ‘big beauties’, as I call them. There is the Sphinx, too – that half-lion, half-human giant of the desert that sits comfortably close to the pyramids, guarding them day and night.

There is something disturbingly odd about the town of Giza. Towering over all the modern-day homes and businesses, one can see the huge ancient boulders that make up the famous pyramids. These are mammoth structures built thousands of years ago, using methods of construction that today’s experts can only guess at. Surrounding and almost suffocating the pyramids is the half-hearted workmanship of Giza’s present-day dwellings. One cannot help but ask the question: “Where is everything else?” There seems to be a vast chunk of past civilisation missing. But that is one of the majestic feelings experienced in Giza; evidence of life over four thousand years ago, standing side by side with the life in the year 2011.

Taking a walk down the main street in Giza, aptly named ‘Pyramid Street’ (*Al-Haram* in Arabic), it is amusing and fascinating to see camels, donkeys and carts, horses, lorries, cars, tuk-tuks, motorbikes and pedestrians all fighting for their space on the crowded road. Some things have changed over the years, while others remain just as they were thousands of years ago. In fact, things are not very different on many of the streets in Cairo. Some of the things that one sees here are almost unbelievable, and some of them can leave one feeling very upset. Now and again, there is unexpected relief when a funny incident occurs within the chaos of the streets.

My trouble was that I had fallen in love with the ancient Egypt I had learned about while I was still in England; the modern-day Egypt that I had to adjust to was not always so thrilling.

The pollution in Cairo is something I was not used to. With a lethal combination of industrial and car pollution, desert and street dust, I often just choose to stay at home instead of venturing outside struggling to find some air to breathe. I dust around the house and clean the floors one day, only to find a new layer of dust the very next day. After three days, the dust is so thick that if it is left untouched, it can stop electrical equipment from working. It makes the home look like it has not been cleaned for two years. For the sake of sanity, I call it ‘pyramid dust’: ancient particles drifting through the air from the Giza giants just down the road. I imagine the Pharaohs secretly waking in the dark of the night to brush away the dust from their precious boulders. By morning, the dirt of antiquity has penetrated into millions of Egyptian homes. It is soul-destroying, the street and desert dust, and it just keeps on falling.

Coming from a country with a free national health service, I certainly experienced a shock when I needed medical help here in Egypt. I believe that every human being deserves the right to good and easily affordable healthcare, if not free healthcare. The system here is a horror story. Basically, if you become very ill and you cannot afford to pay for treatment, you may as well sit on the roadside and die. Nobody will notice. Really, it is that bad. First you have to find a hospital that can treat your problem; this will leave you searching for hours. You might get an ambulance to help you, but you will have to pay for each trip, as with a taxi. To be admitted in a hospital, you need to bring along enough money to cover the cost of treatment. Pay the money at the reception desk, and hopefully you will not have to wait too long for a doctor to see you – unless by this time you are already dead.

Taxis here are black and white death traps. Most of them are very old, second-hand Ladas imported from a faraway place. You feel blessed if the taxi in which you are travelling is made up of only two different cars glued together, not four. Sitting in the back

of the taxis is frustrating in itself. If you would like to open or close the window, you have to kindly ask the taxi driver for the handle that winds the window up or down. He keeps it safely in the glove box at the front!

All day long, Cairo's roads are jam-packed with cars. The traffic is slow-moving, and the beeping of horns is almost music to the ears – if you are in a good mood, that is. The horns continue beeping late into the night, and I have devised a new version of counting sheep to get to sleep – not by counting the beeps but by counting the seconds between beeps. Even inside our home, you can still hear the honking in the distance. If I am having trouble getting to sleep, I just relax and listen for a beep; then I start counting and start at the beginning again once a beep breaks the silence. I have not gotten past five seconds of peace yet!

As for Egyptian cooking, I am sure that most of the recipes were invented by the men here. They use combinations of foods that are very strange to me, and all the meals seem designed to keep women in the kitchen for hours and hours. Once the meal is over, they spend many more hours in the kitchen cleaning it all up, with no men in sight to lend a helping hand.

There are hundreds of thousands of apartment buildings to house the twenty million or so residents of Cairo. The ground floor level of each building is for business. Since there are no restrictions, you can take up whatever business strikes your fancy, whether it is related to food, clothing or industry. Sometimes the noise is at a level that makes you want to scream. Calling the police out for these kinds of complaints is a waste of time. They just say that this is a man's business and livelihood, so what can be done? There is absolutely no respect for anyone when it comes to noise levels.

I am not sure what is worse here in Cairo: the air pollution or the noise pollution. They go hand in hand. The only completely quiet times are between about 4:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. A steady

increase of noise begins shortly after the dawn prayer and erupts into chaotic decibels that last throughout the day, until the noise gradually subsides in the small hours of the night.

Britain has many rules that one must abide by, and most people usually observe them. One very helpful law is the noise restriction time. In general, one must not disturb the peace between the hours of 10:30 p.m. and 7:30 a.m. Oh, how I miss that law! Egyptians start laughing when I explain this law to them. What? No noise after a certain time? Are you serious? In Egypt, people can make as much noise as they like, with no consideration at all for the peace of others. This is ironic because people greet each other all day long with the saying “Peace be upon you,” and the reply is “And upon you be peace.” Well, if the neighbours have been up all night until 4:00 a.m. with the television blaring, and in passing the next morning, they say to you, “Peace be upon you”, it really does test your patience and neighbourly friendliness. But the attitude here in Egypt is that everyone has the right to do what they want in their own home (and everyone else can just suffer).

Every street in Cairo is a child’s playground, where rough boys and girls play until the small hours of the night, teasing the cats and lighting small fires. Generally, Egypt is a safe place for children, but I found it incredibly strange and worrying to hear the sounds of children playing outside well after midnight. I still cannot understand how parents allow their children to be out so late instead of putting them to bed.

One of the saddest things I have seen here was at a local bakery. As I was purchasing our daily bread, a little boy came out from the deep, dark backroom where the bread is baked. He had been sent out on an errand, and as the sun hit his face, he blinked continuously as his eyes tried to adapt to the light. It seemed as though he had been working in the bakery for weeks in total darkness. He looked dirty, as if his clothes had never been anywhere

near a washing machine. The saddest thing, though, was that this little boy had the look, mannerisms and speech of an adult. He obviously had been working in the bakery for a long time, forced to kiss his childhood goodbye. He was around ten years old. Sadly, child labour exists all over Egypt.

On every street, you find the same kinds of shops and businesses, selling the same things. There is a baker, butcher, mini supermarket, toy shop, egg shop, sweet shop, takeaway restaurant, fruit juice shop, mobile phone shop and possibly a few other types. You will find these shops in every street, guaranteed. If a business works here in Cairo, everyone will copy it within a short time. All over Egypt, you will see a saturated market of copycats.

The egg shop amuses me every time I pass by. It sells nothing but eggs: small eggs, big eggs, white eggs and brown eggs. The shop is full of rows and rows of eggs, and that's it. You can buy a tray full of eggs or just a single egg if that's all you need. When I see a customer inside, I wonder if the conversation with the shopkeeper goes something like this:

“Good morning sir, what can I get you?”

“Hmm... I'd like some eggs please.”

“Well, you've come to the right place.”

One would never believe that Egypt has many laws and rules. Unfortunately, most of them are not enforced, so members of the society are left to do pretty much what they like. The Egyptian people are neglected and uninformed; many are silently suffering day after day. The only thing that saves Egypt from disaster is the fact that most of its inhabitants have a religious conscience and a set of morals that seem to keep most things in order. Egypt's progress is painfully slow, mainly due to the fact that its government does not place any value on educating its people to a higher standard, leaving a backward country stagnant and on the verge of collapse.

Cairo's list of negative features goes on and on... rubbish in the streets, rats and cockroaches foraging among the stored fruits and vegetables of the many restaurants and shops selling takeaway foods, stray dogs, days without any running water in the home and no information about when the water will return, frequent electric blackouts, and... and... and...

However, here in Cairo, I met the most wonderful man on this earth: my husband. He helped me, with all the patience in the world, astonishing me from the start. Nobody had ever treated me with such kindness, respect and love. He is a genuine man, who helped me through a very tough time and change in my life, sincerely trying to make life easier for me. I could not have done anything without his love and guidance.

My compatriots are widely known for their often cold and rigid communication styles; many live a somewhat reserved life, preferring to 'keep themselves to themselves'. In such appealing contrast, the Egyptian people are simple and easygoing; they are happy, kind and helpful. Egyptians are very sociable; their personalities display charisma and warmth. They are excellent communicators, often adding expressive hand and arm movements to their conversations.

Most Egyptians give priority to family life over everything else in their society. Large family gatherings are frequent, and they openly share the daily goings-on and discussions of life's troubles and blessings. Close friends are also considered to be extended members of the family, extending the network of help, support and companionship. Guests in Egyptian homes are welcomed with much generosity and are frequently invited to stay for dinner.

One such warm welcome I hold dear in my heart is the first time I met my husband's brother, with his wife and children. As I sat in the room where they receive guests, four curious children gathered around me, wanting to see who the 'English lady' was.

I could not speak any Arabic with them, and they were shy in using the little English they knew. But instead of just leaving me to be ignored due to my lack of Arabic language skills, one of my husband's nieces gathered all of her English/Arabic schoolbooks and quietly sat beside me, encouraging me to take a look and start talking to her and the family. It was an excellent icebreaker and one of my first Arabic lessons, prompted by the young children.

Many things here in Egypt are delightfully different from how they are in England. Conveniently, most shops stay open late, often well after midnight, whereas in England they generally close at 5:30 p.m. I like the many fruit and vegetable stalls that are scattered around most of the streets here; one is not forced to travel miles to a supermarket to get necessary supplies. There are also many shops selling rabbits, chickens, pigeons, ducks, fish, cows, goats, camels and sheep – many of which are still alive and waiting for someone to select them and take them home (after being slaughtered in the name of Allah). One can even watch a cow being slaughtered in a street butcher shop, although this is not advised for the fainthearted. As for me, I cannot help but watch in amazement this process that one would never see on the streets in the UK.

Numerous street traders add to the lively hustle and bustle of everyday life in Cairo. Donkey carts are used by men collecting recyclable goods; they shout, '*Bikya bikya* (Old stuff)' as they pass through the streets. They are also used by those who are selling gas bottles (for gas stoves); their attention-grabbing techniques involve continuously banging a spanner on the side of a gas canister for customers not yet connected to the piped gas system. Cries of '*Nâ'nâ*' (fresh mint)', '*Fool* (cooked fava beans)', '*Başal* (onions)' and '*Tomâtom* (tomatoes)' are heard several times each day, along with the whistles and vuvuzelas blown by traders selling candy floss and sweets.

Here in Cairo, the donkey works extremely hard for his master, pulling heavy loads around all day in the hot sun and dusty streets, occasionally getting whipped to make him move faster. At night, he is tied up facing a wall and left until the following morning. The donkey is then heard several times throughout the night braying (making a distressing harsh noise); this is because he is seeing Satan. After his hard work during the day, the poor donkey gets bothered by Satan when he is trying to get some rest.

But joy for the donkey is in the fasting month of Ramadan, when Allah (ﷻ) gathers up all devils and jails them for the entire month. No longer are the cries of the donkeys due to Satan. The occasional braying can still be heard, but this may be because the donkey wants to rest or is hungry.

Abu Hurayrah (*raḍiya Allāhu ‘anhū* – may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet (*ṣalla Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* – blessings and peace be upon him) said:

« When you hear the crowing of roosters, ask for Allah’s blessings, for (their crowing indicates that) they have seen an angel. And when you hear the braying of donkeys, seek refuge with Allah from Satan, for (their braying indicates that) they have seen a devil. » (Bukhari)

Abu Hurayrah also narrated that Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ) said:

« When the month of Ramadan comes, the gates of paradise are opened and the gates of the hellfire are closed, and the devils are chained. » (Bukhari)

A wonderful reward for awakening early is hearing the crowing of cockerels, for they are witnessing the sight of angels.

Far from all the noise, pollution and chaos of Cairo, there is a little ‘gem’ that my family and I frequently visit. This is seventy-four acres of lush green landscaped gardens often referred to as the ‘Lung of Cairo’, more formally known as Al-Azhar Park. The

Aga Khan financed this beautiful project as a gift for the citizens of Egypt in 1984. It offers an escape for our family from the endless monochrome concrete city, a place where we can enjoy flower gardens, fountains, walkways, children's play areas, restaurants and cafes. Special 'lookouts' around the park enable us to see panoramic views of Old Cairo and way beyond. Even the pyramids of Giza can be spotted on a clear day. In one of the park's restaurants, an archway entrance creatively displays views of the Mohammad Ali Mosque, which is situated high up within the Citadel complex. It is hard to believe, while strolling around the peacefulness of the park and breathing in some finer air, that you are actually in the heart of a heavily-polluted city – and even more hard to believe that the land was once a rubbish-dumping ground and was part of the desert before that.

Modern everyday life in Egypt provides a standard of living for many that is backward; yet in other areas, it is more advanced. It is a land containing a huge, growing population, with many of its inhabitants underprivileged, neglected and downtrodden by their government. Egyptians have increasingly been forced into protesting and campaigning for human rights, government support, fair treatment, decent living standards and the like. The Egyptian people desperately need a new system that will take many of them out of unnecessary poverty and provide a better standard of living for themselves and the future generations. Most of the underprivileged are peacefully and patiently waiting for a better lifestyle to come their way; many just utter to themselves and to each other *alḥamdulillāh* (all praise is for God).

My simple description of life in Egypt is from the viewpoint of a foreigner, an outsider looking in. Many Egyptians are suffering, and I cannot even attempt to describe how they view their life now or in the past, or what they really hope for themselves or for their nation's future.

Additionally, Cairo, like Egypt as a whole, is not a place where all Muslims carry out their religious obligations. Some observe and practice the Islamic teachings completely, while others have let go of some if not all practices and have strayed. Maybe difficult living standards and a feeling of hopelessness for the future have caused many to lose their faith; only Allah truly knows why people and societies are the way they are. I do not believe that there are any people or societies anywhere in the world that can be described as completely perfect, regardless of their religion.

It is also worth noting that Egypt, along with other Muslim countries, has not always had such 'third world' conditions. People of this generation, without some historical background, might be tempted to think that Muslims have always been 'backward', disorganised, and chaotic. In reality, societies change over time; empires rise and fall.

If one were to look back 1,200 years, one would see a strikingly different picture. Europe, including England, was in the depth of its 'Dark Ages', while Muslim lands, including Egypt, were enjoying the 'Islamic Golden Age'. Muslims were at the forefront of scientific and cultural achievements, and Muslim cities were famous for their orderly, clean streets and well-functioning institutions that served the public and maintained justice. Maybe, over time, things will change again, and we will see Muslims rising to the challenge of creating societies that are more organised and just than they currently are in the Middle East.

I miss England very much, and it is always in my thoughts. But if I were to return to England, I would miss Egypt more. Something in Egypt gets into your heart and takes hold, never to let go. There is an atmosphere here that is characteristic of Egypt only – I have not witnessed it anywhere else in all my travels. Maybe it is an ancient aura left by the pharaohs that will never go away.

After I converted to Islam and married, we received a most precious gift from Allah (ﷻ) – I became pregnant, and in 2008, I gave birth to a baby girl. In the following year, I became pregnant again and had a boy. This can only lead me to say that my life here is filled with such love and warm affection that I could never let go of it. Four of the best things that have ever happened to me have happened in Egypt: Islam and my husband, daughter and son.

CHAPTER 4

A WAY OF LIFE

I converted to Islam in April 2007 at the Al-Azhar Mosque and University. Situated in Cairo, it is said to be the oldest operating university in the world.

As part of my conversion, I repeated the following declaration of faith (*shahâdah*) to embrace Islam:

“I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.

“I also acknowledge that Moses, Jesus and all other prophets are servants and Messengers of Allah. I renounce all religions other than Islam. Furthermore, I hereby and henceforth adhere to Islam as my faith and *Sharia*.”⁷

To make my conversion official, I signed a certificate authenticating my adoption of Islam. A certificate is usually required to prove that one has converted to Islam when travelling to Makkah for the *Hajj* (the major pilgrimage to the Sacred Mosque, site of the *Kaaba* in Makkah, to be undertaken by every able Muslim once in

⁷ *Sharia* is Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah; it comes from the Arabic word for 'path'.

his or her lifetime), but sincerely believing the above shahâdah is all that is necessary to become a Muslim.

Immediately after I became a Muslim, I had a wonderful feeling of euphoria flowing through me, lasting for weeks and weeks. It led me to tiptoe around weightlessly, smiling and laughing and enjoying a new feeling that I had just turned in the right direction and there was no going back. Once the euphoria had passed, I settled back down to the normality of life. However, life now had a new meaning for me, and each day was a day of happy learning.

Muslims in general are incredibly knowledgeable about their religion. It is their way of life from birth and right into adulthood. Praying, reading the Qur'an, abiding by Islamic laws and ethics, fasting and making Hajj, to name but a few, are actions that make a Muslim.

Life as a Muslim would certainly have been easier if I had been born into a Muslim family. There are many habits and customs that I had to adjust to that seriously tested the strength of my faith. I struggled with most of the daily sayings and actions that most Muslims probably do not give a second thought to.

One of the first changes I needed to make was to start wearing appropriate clothing, covering my body and wearing the *hijab* (the head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women). I must admit that I was quite excited about wearing a hijab. Especially here in Egypt, many ladies wear it almost purely as a fashion accessory. This is the wrong reason, of course, but they do make the most of a simple piece of material: brightly-coloured, textured and patterned fabric is swooped around the head and neck, fastened with attractive little pins.

My first day out wearing a hijab was a laughable mess. I had a black silk hijab that I could not quite wrap around my head in the expert manner that the other ladies did. Anyway, I managed to somehow fasten it to my head, and my husband and I went to

downtown Cairo. As we approached a walkway where many illegal street sellers were conducting their business, my husband noticed the police coming, and we saw the street vendors start to scramble. My hijab came loose and was about to fall off; my husband was trying to help me while, close to us, a tray of sunglasses was thrown into the air as the seller ran away. We did not know whether to collect the glasses for the man, sort out my hijab or just give up. That was my first experience with a hijab.

As the weather in Cairo started to get hotter and hotter, I became increasingly bothered by wearing the hijab. It felt uncomfortable because my head would sweat and itch every time I wore one. My hair was no longer exposed to the elements; I yearned for the wind to blow through my hair again, cooling me down and ventilating my head. And what was the point of doing my hair, only to have it covered up and pressed onto my head with a wrap of material? All through the summer, it aggravated me, and as winter approached, I thought I would be pleased that the hijab would keep my head warm. But no, I still felt unhappy about it; I wanted the cold winter breezes around my head and neck moving my hair, as if nature were giving me a little refreshing head massage.

The same kind of feelings developed when I wore clothing that covered my entire body. My skin felt suffocated because I no longer felt the feathery strokes of air on my arms or legs; it really was a strange thing to get used to after thirty-five years of wearing anything I wanted to.

As I battled with my thoughts, I forced myself to accept that this was the way it was going to be. Slowly, over time, I got used to wearing the hijab, and I came to understand the reasons I should wear it. Most importantly, I wear it because I have been commanded to do so by Allah. He wants me to hide the beauty that only my husband or close relatives can see and admire, not to display it to anybody and everybody in the street. Today, I enjoy and appreciate

wearing the hijab for those reasons, and I would feel strange going outside without wearing one. It took me many months to reach this feeling, though.

After I had converted to Islam, my husband taught me how to pray. He carefully wrote down all the steps of the prayer with precise detail: what to say when, when to stand or prostrate, and so on. He beautifully illustrated the moves one makes in the prayer by drawing a matchstick man in different positions! He physically demonstrated the moves and pronounced *Soorat* (Chapter of the Qur'an) *al-Fâtiḥah*, the testimony of faith, and the other utterances said in the prayer. For me, this was a huge amount to learn; I was overwhelmed, but I wanted and needed to pray without delaying it. When we prayed together, I first copied his prayer movements without words so I could get used to that part. After I learned *Soorat al-Fâtiḥah* and the testimony of faith, I added them to my prayer and slowly became confident with the basic prayer. Still, I had two problems that disrupted my prayers every time.

My main problem was concentration – or the lack of it. In every prayer and in each step, my mind would drift away, and I would think about all sorts of things: good thoughts, bad thoughts, mundane thoughts and even out of the ordinary thoughts. I found it very hard to focus on the prayer and to focus on Allah (ﷻ). It took many months to develop good concentration in my prayers; even today, I sometimes find myself losing track of where I am in the prayer and having to make the extra prostration of forgetfulness at the end of prayer (to make up for any mistakes I may have made).

Another problem was a very peculiar thing that would happen to me the moment I began praying. As soon as I said the opening *Allâhu akbar* (Allah is the Greatest) and tried to focus on my prayer, I would feel a slight itch under my nose. This would happen at least a couple of times in each prayer, every day, and it used to drive me absolutely mad. I tried to ignore it, but the itch would become

stronger and stronger until I had to break my focus and relieve my itchy nose, ruining the solemnity and concentration of my prayer. Because this happened almost always as soon as I settled into every prayer, I knew this was not just a normal itch. I believe this was Satan trying to put me off and make me give up. This happened for the first several months; now it just happens occasionally.

A feeling of fear swept over me as I realised I had to overcome the biggest challenge yet: fasting the month of Ramadan to complete one of the five pillars of Islam. Panic and anxiety ran through my body every time I thought about the word ‘fast’. Never in my life had I been without food and water for more than a few hours (thank God), let alone going without food or water for twelve hours every day for a whole month – by choice! I even felt scared that Ramadan was slowly approaching and that I would have to go through this terrible ordeal. I worried about what would happen if I was fasting and at some point throughout the day, I just could not continue any longer because I was so thirsty or hungry. I would fail the test and be pathetic; after all, even some children fast because they want to, and they are not even required to! I just could not see myself getting through the month. And what about preparing and cooking daily meals for my family, smelling all the wonderful food cooking in the kitchen while I was hungry and thirsty? My thoughts were that this was going to be a very difficult time.

The first day of Ramadan finally came, and I prepared myself with the intention to fast, with the mental approach of ‘taking it one day at a time’. The light pre-dawn meal, eaten just before the fast begins, was not so ‘light’ for me. I was so afraid that I would not make it through the day that I ate as if I had not eaten in weeks, to really make sure that I would stay full for a long time. After the meal, I prayed the dawn prayer and then settled back down to sleep again, dreading the next thirty days of fasting. As it turned out, my first day of fasting came and went, and it was less terrifying than

I had expected. Yes, it was hard; it is not meant to be easy, or what would the point be? But with a little extra focus and attention on Allah, I actually ended up enjoying the part of the day which was bereft of food and drink. My stomach even felt better as it took a rest from all the churning and digesting of food.

The weather was very hot and dry, though, so I struggled with thirst more than hunger. I admit that when I heard the call to prayer for the noon and afternoon prayers, I almost ran to the bathroom to make ablutions for prayer, because that involved rinsing my mouth with water, which relieved its dryness. It was a thought and action that I know is not right, but I could not help it for the first week or two. Thirty days is a long time to fast, day after day. I ended up changing my lifestyle, trying to fit other daily tasks around the fast.

On several occasions, my husband expressed a feeling that he would experience just before the arrival of Ramadan; he described it as ‘a smell in the air of Ramadan approaching’. I have not experienced this feeling yet, but I know exactly what he means. Maybe the feeling is in anticipation of something wonderful about to happen – Muslims the world over united in the month long fast, when thoughts of Allah, spiritual reflection and good deeds are probably more prominent than at any other time of the year.

I have missed two fasts since becoming a Muslim, once because I was pregnant and the other while breastfeeding. During both these times, women are exempt from fasting if it will harm them or their babies, but they are obliged to make up for any missed fasts at a more suitable time.

The etiquette of eating was another challenge for me. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught Muslims to eat with their right hands. Changing the hand that I ate with was like trying to eat soup with chopsticks, and dinner times became frustrating for me. Eating with the right hand went against all the eating etiquette I had been taught while growing up: knife in the right hand, fork in the left hand, and so

on. Here in Egypt, the practice is easy for most people, considering the type of food that is served. In general, one scoops up food with a small piece of bread and then pops that into the mouth. Egyptian food, consisting of rice, vegetables and meat, does not require a knife and fork – just hands, bread or at most a fork.

Two years of re-training have led me to become quite clever at feeding myself with a fork in my right hand, but I am still not comfortable eating with just my hand and a piece of bread.

The only way I knew how to eat was from a plate containing a fixed quantity of food, and my idea of dining involved all the table manners you can think of. The first time I shared a family meal here in the Middle East, where it is customary to have many different dishes set about the table in a ‘help yourself’ style, I felt very awkward, embarrassed and shy. Everyone had to keep nudging me to take food and eat.

The last time I ate pork was just before I immigrated to Egypt. My meal that morning was a typical English breakfast of pork bacon, eggs and beans. As I was eating it, I did not realise that it would be my last taste of pig meat, let alone that in the near future, just the thought of eating pig would make me feel sick. After four years of refraining from pork, I can say that I have not missed it at all.

Still, I did do some research on the Internet about why Muslims do not eat pork. The first reason, and the only reason a Muslim needs, is that Allah has forbidden it:

﴿إِنَّمَا حَرَّمَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْمَيْتَةَ وَالدَّمَ وَلَحْمَ الْخِنْزِيرِ وَمَا أُهْلَ لِغَيْرِ اللَّهِ بِهِ ...﴾

(سورة النحل: الآية ١١٥)



﴿He has forbidden you only the meat of a dead animal, blood, the **flesh of swine**, and any animal which is slaughtered as a sacrifice for others than Allah...﴾

(Qur'an 16: 115)

﴿ يَسْأَلُونَكَ مَاذَا أُحِلَّ لَهُمْ قُلْ أُحِلَّ لَكُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتُ وَمَا عَلَّمْتُم مِّنَ الْجَوَارِحِ مُكَلِّبِينَ تُعَلِّمُونَهُنَّ مِمَّا عَلَّمَكُمُ اللَّهُ فَكُلُوا مِمَّا أَمْسَكْنَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَادْكُرُوا اسْمَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ ﴾

(سورة المائدة: الآية ٤)

«They ask you [O Muhammad] what is lawful for them [as food]. Say: Lawful to you are *at-tayyibât* [all kinds of foods which Allah has made lawful] and those beasts and birds of prey which you have trained as hounds, training and teaching them [to catch] in the manner as directed to you by Allah. So eat of what they catch for you, but pronounce the name of Allah over it, and fear Allah. Verily, Allah is Swift in reckoning.» (Qur'an 5: 4)

This belief is enough, and Muslims do not need to look into the matter any further. When I did, though, I learned how disgusting pigs actually are, in terms of what they eat and how they behave. The pig and its meat are pure filth. The Bible also advises its followers not to eat pig:

And the swine, because it divideth the hoof, yet cheweth not the cud, it is unclean unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, nor touch their dead carcasses. (Deuteronomy 14:8)

Nevertheless, I do not know a single Christian who avoids eating pork because it says so in the Bible. This instruction is one that is mostly ignored in the Christian religion.*

Through the Qur'an and over a period of time, Allah has forbidden us from drinking alcohol:

* Most Christians believe that the laws of the Old Testament have been superseded by the New Testament and thus do not apply to them. (Editor)

﴿يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْخَمْرِ وَالْمَيْسِرِ قُلْ فِيهِمَا إِثْمٌ كَبِيرٌ وَمَنْفَعٌ لِلنَّاسِ وَإِثْمُهُمَا أَكْبَرُ مِنْ نَفْعِهِمَا وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ مَاذَا يُنْفِقُونَ قُلِ الْعَفْوَ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَفَكَّرُونَ﴾ (سورة البقرة الآية ٢١٩)

﴿They ask you [O Muhammad] concerning alcoholic drink and gambling. Say: In them is a great sin, and [some] benefit for men, but the sin of them is greater than their benefit. And they ask you what they ought to spend. Say: That which is beyond your needs. Thus Allah makes clear to you His laws in order that you may give thought.﴾ (Qur'an 2: 219)

Alcohol takes away one's control in life and takes away one's fear, leading a person under the influence of alcohol to do things that he or she might not normally do. Alcohol is the path towards many sins. Just take a look at a non-Muslim society where alcohol is freely used, and you will see a society filled with violence, sickness and immoral lifestyles.

As with pork, I have no desire to consume alcohol, even though regular drinking was considered normal in my circles before I became a Muslim. I am glad that pork and alcohol are not part of my life now.

Virtually all Muslims utter remembrances of Allah (ﷻ) in various situations throughout their day. As I learned some of these and started to put them into practice, I became very fond of the phrase *bismillâh* (in the name of Allah). I found comfort, security, hope and calm in saying *bismillâh* just before doing any kind of activity, like cooking or eating food, handling my children or doing the housework. This is because when you say *bismillâh*, with sincere remembrance of Allah, it ensures that you receive His help and support with your task. Indeed, Allah will sanctify your efforts.

Another saying that you will hear Muslims utter many times a day is *alḥamdulillâh* (all praise is for God), expressing to Allah

our deep feelings of gratefulness and appreciation. This is said after eating, and it is a perfect reply when someone enquires about your health.

Whenever a negative thought or feeling enters your mind, you can seek the protection of Allah from Satan by saying *a'oodhu billâhi min ash-shaytân ir-rajeem* (I seek refuge with Allah from Satan, the accursed). There are many other sayings too, all of which enable you to remember Allah and ask for His guidance and help. Duties and habits such as praying, reciting the Qur'an and repeating remembrances of Allah every day serve to build up a very strong relationship between the Muslim and Allah.

Although I have learned the Arabic alphabet, I struggle immensely when reading the Qur'an. I have memorised several short soorahs, which I use in my prayer. My husband taught me some of the soorahs, and I have used a Qur'an translation and transliteration website, which has helped enormously with pronunciation and reading the script. I also use a Qur'an that has extra large print so I can see the script more clearly, especially the vowel markings used above, below and around the letters, which are needed for correct pronunciation of the words.

Our family frequently gathers to listen to my husband recite the Qur'an. These are very special moments when we are all together, the home is at peace with no television noise, and the housework and cooking are finished. Our children are too young to understand the exact meaning of the verses, but they are completely aware of their importance, and their attention is with their father while he recites the words of Allah.

I have had two extraordinary experiences with the Qur'an. The first was the day after I gave birth to my son, who came into the world like my daughter – by caesarean section. I was in a lot of pain at the time, and as I lay down to rest, we played the Qur'an quietly. I was able to relax as I listened. The more I listened, the more I felt

that the words were actually floating all over my body helping it to heal. I felt the words hovering around my head, over my eyes and unexplainably inside my breath. The words took me into a deep sleep. I remember feeling safe and warm, and I felt sure that Allah was helping me and healing me. I think of this moment often and wonder about it.

On another occasion, I had been suffering with a severe earache after having caught a cold in my ear. Even with three different types of medicines prescribed by the doctor, the ear pain just seemed to linger. For well over a month, I could not free my ear of the pain and the infection. On one particularly bad day, the pain was so acute that I actually had an exaggerated thought that I was going to die. I felt despair, and as the time came to put my family and myself to bed, I knew that when I lay down, the pain would be worse and I would not get any sleep.

I turned to the Qur'an that night. Using a small speaker system positioned very close to my bed, I set up my iPod, which contained all the verses of the Qur'an, recited by Shaykh Mishary Rashed Al-Afasy. I played the Qur'an quietly and listened, not knowing what else I could do for myself. I was in such a state of hopelessness regarding the pain that my thoughts were that if the Qur'an was in some kind of tangible form (other than the book itself), I would actually want to hold it in my arms, like a child who attaches himself to his mother when he is sick and in need of help, reassurance and love. I had an overwhelming desire to be close to the Qur'an. I fell asleep listening to the Qur'an all through that night. I slept well, and after a few days, the pain finally disappeared. Whether it was Allah who healed my ear infection through the Qur'an or whether my ear simply restored itself to health, the fact is when I felt almost desperate for help, I wanted nothing other than the words of Allah.

In the early days after becoming a Muslim, I had many discussions with my husband about Islam. We would talk for hours,

with him especially explaining to me all the wonderful stories of the many prophets that Allah (ﷻ) sent to humankind. We also talked about things that a Muslim can do purely for the sake of Allah. What we discussed inspired me deeply. Throughout my life, I had usually done favours and good deeds for others with the expectation that I would get something in return, whether it was acceptance, love, money, admiration, or praise. Never before had I thought about doing a good deed for other people without expecting a reward of some kind. An even more powerful action is to do some good while absolutely no one is watching, without telling anyone what you have done, when the only witnesses are your angels and Allah.

Imagine this scenario: you step out of your home and start walking down the empty street in front of you, which is close to a school. Not a single person is in sight. You know that in half an hour, children will be arriving to start their school day. On the ground in front of you, you see the remains of a broken glass bottle. Sharp glass shards are spread over the ground near the school entrance. You can foresee the possibility of a child, adult or animal getting hurt by this glass, so without a second thought, you return home to get a brush to clear up the mess, along with a bag to carry away the glass. There is no one around to help you, to thank you, to praise you, or to spread the word that you are such a thoughtful, caring citizen. You go ahead and clean up the mess, get rid of the danger and continue on your journey without thinking that this was wasted effort and time because you received no instant reward. Instead, you thank Allah for the opportunity to do a good deed, knowing that Allah will reward you at some time.

How about the act of praying while no one is watching or knows that you are praying, or fasting when you have told no one you are doing so?

Maybe one of the hardest acts of pure kindness is to give money to charity anonymously. Again, because your angels and

Allah know exactly what you have done, the act itself will bring happiness, and it will be an easy thing to do.

Prayer can be a private act, too. Apart from the five daily prayers that a Muslim is required to perform from dawn to nightfall, there are other voluntary prayers. One is the late night prayer. It may be performed any time during the night, after the last obligatory prayer of the day and before dawn, but the best time is during the last third of that time period. This is the time when the Muslim comes closest to his or her Lord. Imagine praying this prayer in the deep of the night, when all around you is silent and calm. Other household members are sleeping peacefully, and no one but Allah and His angels know that you are praying.

You may have to brainstorm to think of actions that can be done without another person's knowledge or reward, those deeds that you can do just for the sake of Allah, His acceptance and His reward. But there are many possibilities, and I look forward to any special opportunities that come my way.

For many years, a large area of my life has been filled with my passion to draw, paint and create. Although I never took up professionally any particular artistic interest, I have always loved to explore my artistic abilities. My interests have been further stimulated, since becoming a Muslim, by the wonderful world of Islamic art. Used in many aspects of Islamic life, this distinctive art form can be found in architecture, particularly inside mosques; it is also found in calligraphy, usually in the form of Qur'anic verses that decorate objects for the home and business. It is also manifested in the decoration of carpets and ceramics. Not only did my travels inspire me to sketch, draw and design pictures taken from the various Islamic sites I visited, but living in Cairo now also gives me access to a vast range of Islamic art.

Since Islamic art techniques forbid the representation of the human or animal form, patterns and shapes based on repeated

geometrical designs and Arabic script are used instead. Of particular interest to me are the calligraphic forms and shapes produced using the Arabic alphabet letters. All of this fits in beautifully with my need to learn Arabic: the spoken language and the written word, especially the Qur'an.

At an early age, when our two children could crawl, they would naturally want to join my husband and me when we prayed. Sitting close to us, listening and watching what we were doing, shortly progressed to both of them copying our movements as soon as they were able to stand and walk. Their curiosity about what we were doing naturally led them to want to join us in prayer, even though they attempted only bits and pieces of it. This included prostrating, holding their hands together close to their chests at the beginning of the prayer and even mimicking the soft whisperings pronounced throughout the prayer. Many times, they would both say out loud, 'AKBAR!' after my husband had said 'Allâhu akbar' in the prayer.

I have been pleasantly surprised by how our children have wanted to participate in praying, albeit in their own way. It is a perfect start for them until they reach a more appropriate age, when they will be able to seriously learn how to offer their prayers.

There is not a more vitally important reason to continue living in an Islamic country than the birth of our two children. My husband and I now have the honour and responsibility of raising them as Muslims. We believe it would be a devastating loss to deny our children a Muslim upbringing by going to live, for example, in my homeland of England. Our children would still be raised as Muslims, but it would be a whole different experience compared to what they are getting now in Egypt.

Since birth, our children have heard the call to prayer every day; they watch us and other family members praying. They understand that when we go outside, I will be wearing a hijab and suitable clothing, and they see other ladies outside also dressed in

the same way. We are surrounded by mosques almost everywhere we go. Our children have the opportunity to learn the Qur'an through classes in a nearby mosque; they will be educated in a school that teaches the same Islamic practices, ethics, and morals as the teachings they receive at home. They will be taught stories about the prophets in the Qur'an and about the life of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), who taught us our religion. Our children know and play with other Muslim children. They eat the meat from animals that have been slaughtered in the name of Allah (ﷻ).

Our children are enclosed in an Islamic way of life that my husband and I consider vital for them at their tender ages. Some of the Islamic practices I listed here can be found in non-Islamic countries, but it would be hard to fulfil most of them, being surrounded by a different majority religion or a multi-faith or faithless society.

In Egypt, there are also Coptic Christians living side by side with Muslims. Putting religion aside, we are all the same; we are human beings, giving and receiving the respect we all rightfully deserve. Our children will be raised to be kind and tolerant to those of different faiths, in the same manner that my husband and I have.

Islam is both a religion and a way of life for its followers. My husband and I believe that we are making the right decision for our children by raising them as Muslims in the Islamic country of Egypt; my husband is an Egyptian, and so too are my daughter and son. When they have grown up and gained a good Islamic upbringing and education, then maybe we would consider living somewhere else.

An incredibly sensitive issue for anyone who has converted, or who is thinking about converting, to Islam is deciding when to inform friends and family members of the change – especially family members. Everyone's situation is unique, but it usually requires gentleness and careful planning.

When I felt ready, I explained to my parents that I was no longer a Christian and had already converted to Islam. I was not quite sure how they would react to my news. I wrote my parents a letter, believing this would be the easiest approach, since they lived in the United Kingdom and I was now living in Egypt. My letter enabled me to write more words to explain what I had done, knowing that I could not communicate things verbally to them face to face in quite the same way. It was a silent approach; just the main facts were written down in what I hoped would be a loving and kind letter.

I was somewhat saddened and disappointed that my parents did not ask any questions about why or how I converted or what things would be different in my life. I received the same response when I announced that I was leaving England to live in Egypt. No questions were asked, and everything was just accepted.

I did, however, feel relieved that my parents still kept in contact with me and treated me in the same way as they did when I was Christian. I have no doubts that, between themselves and with the rest of our family members, my parents had many discussions about my conversion and move to another country. Since I was not involved in their conversations, I felt that they were missing vital information and reasons for what I had done. I, too, was missing their thoughts and opinions on the whole matter, but maybe that will change over time.

Yet I know my parents and their way of thinking towards their children, which is generally: "If that is what you want to do, and if that is what will make you happy, then go right ahead and do it; we will not stop you." Some people (friends or family members) will think that what I have done is wrong, but the most important thing is that it was the right thing for me to do.

I can only thank my parents for not trying to force me to stay in England or trying to stop me from converting to Islam – or even

worse, totally disowning me as their daughter for going against the religion they thought was best for me.

One thing that will never change is the fact that they are my mother and father, and I love them dearly.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT I LEFT BEHIND

Living in the United Kingdom and approaching my thirties, I had most of the desirable things in life, like a stable career, a home, a car, family and friends. However, these things did not provide me with the happiness and contentment that they should have. It was not just that the material things around me made me feel empty; I found the main problem to be the society in which I was living.

I am not providing a researched, scientific or philosophical account of the behaviour and people of Britain; I am simply sharing my own thoughts and opinions through experiencing life in Britain.

I did not fit in any more, and I began to analyse everything around me, including the people. Things were not quite right, and I backed away from the community I had grown up in.

I no longer wanted to struggle to find extra money just so that I could have a 'social life' with my friends, whose idea of having a good time was to throw away hard-earned money on alcohol until almost falling into a coma. I was wasting my time, and it was worrying me. I thank Allah that my life was not spent getting high on drugs, as with many of my friends and acquaintances. Taking drugs had become a 'normal' thing to do, not just where I lived but almost all over the United Kingdom. Some children, most teenagers

and young adults, and an increasing number of the more mature people had turned to drugs.

I worked with a young woman who had a schizophrenic personality, but I just thought that she was having a bad time with hormonal changes and was very expressive about it. I never knew what kind of mood she would be in from hour to hour. Mornings were the worst; her mood was like thunder until the afternoon, when suddenly she became mellow and sweet – only to act nasty and moody again later on. No one knew how to approach her most of the time because we were afraid of her reactions.

Once, after we had spent some time together, she suggested that I try a drug she was using. I have forgotten what it was called, but it was something that is taken up the nose. She disclosed that she took it regularly, usually in the toilets at work, to get through the day. That explained her moods. She said that I should take it, promising, “It will make you feel invincible.” The feeling she achieved was one of being supremely unbeatable, as though she was above everyone and no one could touch her. I thought, “What is the point of that?” Not only had she become a mood freak, but she was putting her life at risk and spending most of her salary on the drug, just to get a feeling she did not have to work hard for – she just had to sniff something up her nose to instantly feel high.

I knew that there were many ways to experience a ‘natural high of happiness’, and that they did not require drugs or alcohol. I thank Allah for not letting me fall into that way of life.

In fact, much of life in the United Kingdom is centred on alcohol. If you walk down any main street, you will find numerous pubs (public houses); these are places that are open for most of the day selling alcohol, usually in a setting that resembles a typical living room. Beer, lager and spirits are on sale here, as well as cooked food and snacks, so you can spend all day here if you like, happily getting yourself full and drunk, oblivious to the real world outside.

A typical working man's habit is to finish his daily work and stop in a pub on the way home, drink a few pints of lager and then stagger home to his family to eat his dinner and sleep. If people do not frequent pubs, then they drink alcohol at home; usually the moment they get home from work, they relax with an alcoholic drink and the television, day after day. In supermarkets, one finds rows and rows of alcohol for sale, so there is no break from it. It is even sold at fuel stations.

Most types of celebrations can only take place if they promise vast amounts of alcohol. This is what gets people excited about attending the events: birthdays, Christmas celebrations, weddings, christenings, sports matches, and sadly even deaths.

The first time I heard the saying "wet the baby's head", I wondered what it meant. When a baby is baptised in church, water is poured on his or her head. Usually, the father and his friends go to the pub before or after the baby's christening, so to "wet the baby's head" means to mimic the christening by drinking to the baby's health.

Birthdays usually mean getting drunk, with all your friends buying rounds and rounds of drinks until you cannot drink, see, talk or even stand up anymore. Weddings are just the same. After a funeral, a gathering takes place with food and, of course, alcohol. One usually says goodbye to the deceased, and remembers his or her life, while drinking alcohol.

It seems that any event, whether it is religious or not, can only proceed with lots and lots of alcohol. If you abstain from drinking alcohol, you are generally considered to be a very boring person indeed, and everyone will keep trying to tempt you into drinking something... just to 'lighten you up a little'.

The miserable truth is that the whole of the United Kingdom is covered with Satan's blanket, and much of what the British culture now stands for is casual and underage sex; alcohol, especially getting

drunk and binge drinking; adultery; violence; drugs; gambling and moneymaking.

People may go about their daily lives outwardly behaving respectfully and decently, but the reality is that many are living immoral, greedy lives. The nation is preoccupied with wealth and materialism, leaving its citizens no time or reason to centre their everyday activities on religion.

The United Kingdom was an entirely different country before the Second World War. Almost everyone attended church every Sunday. They had a special set of clothes they called their 'Sunday best', for looking good when going to church. All shops and businesses were closed for this 'day of rest'.

People generally refrained from sex outside of marriage, living together before marriage and certainly having babies without being married. People had morals and values, and they believed in God. Almost everyone had a copy of the Bible and read it regularly.

Today, most Christians in the United Kingdom have thrown away their religion, opting to say, "I am a Christian," without practicing as one at all. Not many Christians accurately remember the simple short list of the Ten Commandments as written in the Bible, or practice the guiding rules in their lives. The Lord's Prayer has been long forgotten by most, and not many can narrate a story about a Prophet from one of the books of the Bible.

A new kind of worship has developed in recent years. Instead of worshipping God, people now seem to worship money. People will do anything to gain more money and material possessions. Money appears to be the world's biggest 'religion'.

Today in the United Kingdom, most people have everything they could possibly need – and if they do not have it, it is not too hard for them to get it. Businesses cannot wait to lend their money, throwing loans around to everyone regardless of one's ability to

pay it back adequately; the old harsh life, where people saved up for things or went without them, has disappeared for most. The standard of living in the United Kingdom has risen to new heights. Now most people are cocooned in their own world of materialism, having lost sight of the things that are really important, things that money cannot buy. Thinking about and worshipping God does not play a part in their lives.

There is a selfish individualism that has taken over the population. People are often greedy and may rate others as being successful only if they possess a lot of material goods. Values and morals are not looked upon as worthy qualities. In fact, the more immoral a person you are, the more society looks up to you and admires your bad character.

To me, the most grotesque celebration in the United Kingdom is Christmas Day. I say that it is grotesque because of the huge expense of it all. Many people go into debt year after year by using credit cards and getting loans just for this one day of the year. It is actually supposed to be a religious day, but sadly, now it is a commercial day. Television news reports even broadcast details of companies' profits from Christmas sales. It is sickening television viewing, especially if you are one of those who are in debt because of Christmas. To celebrate Christmas in the way expected of you (and you do not need to be a Christian to do so), here is a list of the things you need to buy:

- Individual gifts for each family member and close friend (minimum value usually ten English pounds, though most family members expect a lot more); wrapping paper and gift tags; greeting cards for every person you know inside and outside of work, including all family members.
- A Christmas tree with decorations, including lights; other lights and decorations for your home (inside and outside);

the Christmas day meal consisting of turkey, beef, pork, herb stuffing, vegetables and gravy; alcohol for you and your guests; Christmas crackers (traditional party favours) for everyone attending the meal; stockings filled with small gifts; fizzy drinks; mince pies; Christmas pudding, nuts, chocolates; chocolates to hang on the tree; mistletoe; and on and on.

The cost of Christmas is enormous. One year I announced to my family that I was not going to celebrate it that particular year. They all looked at me as though I were an alien who had just stepped out of a UFO. To be culturally acceptable, you have to celebrate Christmas, whether you want to or not.

Traditionally, Christmas Day was purely to celebrate of the birth of Jesus. Families would gather and attend their local church service, singing hymns and praying.

Today, most Christians in the United Kingdom are non-practicing, and some of them are not even sure if they believe in God. The non-practicing Christians mock and insult the more serious Christians for being active in their religion. They give them various labels, such as: 'do-gooders', 'Bible bashers', 'churchgoers' and 'preachers'. Practicing Christians are laughed at for their strong beliefs and are often looked down upon as fools.

In the United Kingdom and many other countries with Christian majorities, homosexuals can now get married in the church. The message from these churches to society is, "It is OK now to have a relationship with someone of the same sex; come to the church and we will certify this in the eyes of our god." This is a service that was once intended just to unite a man and a woman. Homosexuality is in fact condemned in the Bible:

If a man also lies with man, as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them. (Leviticus 20:13)

It seems that most of the churches and followers of the Bible have completely dismissed this verse and now accept homosexuality openly.

Many stories and news reports have emerged over the years and recently about Christian clergymen sexually abusing young children, mostly boys, in their care at schools and other institutions belonging to and run by the Church in many countries all over the world.

There are thousands of Christian denominations, ranging from the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican churches, Reformed churches, Baptists, and Methodists, all sharing basic elements of Christianity, but with each adding or taking away certain beliefs and practices. The system is not a universal one.

Surely this is a religion that is truly lost.

Sex is displayed almost everywhere in the United Kingdom, especially on television. Music videos are just one step away from being pornographic, and virtually everyone – including children – watches sexually suggestive performances as though they were normal. When you walk into a newsagent's shop and look at the newspapers, you find the front pages of tabloids covered with degrading pictures of virtually naked women for everyone to see, including children. Movies (mainly American) show pretend sexual scenes in almost every movie, and parents quite happily sit through them and watch with their children. Young girls are seen in the streets around the UK trying to dress like their favourite pop stars, and they too look like something from a pornographic film; clothes that are available to them are not suitable for their age.

My words may seem harsh here, but this morally misguided society does not see anything wrong with this kind of behaviour. It has been welcomed and accepted. There was once a decent and reserved society residing in the UK; maybe it is the television that has taken it away.

I do not wish to come across as condescending by criticising my homeland, its main religion and its way of life. I mean to point out exactly what was upsetting me and what I needed to get away from. In many ways, I am embarrassed to say that I was once part of the United Kingdom lifestyle. I feel afraid when I think about ever returning, afraid for my family to witness that kind of lifestyle. Hopefully, Egypt will grant me permission to continue living here and be buried in its land when the time comes.

Christianity represents things that I do not believe in or wish to be a part of. That is why I searched for Allah (ﷻ) and found Islam. The United Kingdom has a place in my heart, and most memories of my former life are dear to me. But I am happier in Egypt. Here I am among fellow Muslims, my brothers and sisters.

CHAPTER 6

THE REWARDS

Believing in Allah, praying, fasting, giving charity and making a pilgrimage are the five mandatory ways in which Muslims worship Allah (ﷻ). In return for this worship, Allah gives many rewards. There are rewards in this life and there are saved rewards, which Muslims will receive after the Judgement Day.

The moment I converted to Islam, I received my first reward from Allah. He instantly forgave all my past sins, effectively ‘wiping the slate clean’. I was at a new beginning, fresh and ready to start the second part of my life. In whatever way Allah viewed my past activities and behaviour, He showered me with His mercy and erased any wrongdoings and sins from my account with Him. It took some time for me to believe that this generous and compassionate gift from Allah had actually been given to me. It was humbling, to say the least. To welcome me into Islam, Allah forgave me before the Judgement Day and gave me a new chance in life.

« Narrated Ibn Shamasa Mahri: When Allah instilled the love of Islam in my heart, I came to the Prophet (ﷺ) and said: Stretch out your right hand so that I may pledge my allegiance to you.

He stretched out his right hand; I withdrew my hand. He (the noble Prophet ﷺ) said: What has happened to you, O ‘Amr?

I replied: I intend to lay down a condition.

He asked: What condition do you intend to put forward?

I said: I should be granted pardon.

He (the Prophet ﷺ) observed: Are you not aware that Islam wipes out all the previous (misdeeds)? Verily, migration wipes out all the previous (misdeeds), and verily, the pilgrimage wipes out all the (previous) misdeeds. » (Muslim)

As a new Muslim, I found that I had an overwhelming number of things to learn about Islam. There is a vast supply of books written on individual Islamic subjects, and a seemingly endless number of websites, some of which are very good and factually correct while others are deliberately corrupt and out to fool their readers. There are also various television channels broadcasting help and advice, education about the stories in the Qur’an, and recitations of the Qur’an.

I did not grow up with the Islamic teachings that Muslim children get at school in Islamic countries, nor did I have the opportunity to spend time at a mosque, listening to and learning the Qur’an. I did not live in an Islamic community or live with a Muslim family that would teach me everything I needed to know about the religion. It is a huge gap that may not get closed in my lifetime, but I study and learn as much as I can whenever possible. Remarkably, whenever I am studying Islam and learn a new concept, I find that it corresponds with what I already believe, and I accept it without doubts. Islam is easy to practice and is in fact the religion of nature.

Abu Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said:

« Religion is very easy, and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. So you should not

be extremists, but try to be near to perfection and receive the good tidings that you will be rewarded. Gain strength by worshiping in the mornings and the nights. » (Bukhari)

I read the Qur'an in English translation, because I am still learning the Arabic language and script. The book that I use also has *hadiths* [statements or actions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that were remembered and recorded by his Companions and followers] written throughout, and I enjoy learning from them as well as learning from the Qur'an.

I have a favourite hadith, one that rewards me every time I read or remember it. The very first time I read it, a part of my brain felt like it had just come into use for the first time, as I tried to imagine an unimaginable thought and vision. I was like a child with a new toy; I kept reading it over and over again and telling everyone all about it. I never tire of reading it, and it always brings a smile to my face. Anas ibn Mâlik (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said:

« There is a tree in paradise (which is so huge that) if a rider travels in its shade for one hundred years, he will not be able to cross it. » (Bukhari)

This is like all the other wonderful things that Allah has promised us that can only be found in paradise. Seeing Allah and dwelling forever in paradise are surely the ultimate rewards.

Another astonishing hadith, whose meaning is traced back not just to the Prophet (ﷺ) but from him to Allah (ﷻ) Himself, is also just impossible to imagine. Abu Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) narrated that Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said:

« Allah said: I have prepared for My pious slaves things which have never been seen by an eye, or heard by an ear, or imagined by a human being. If you wish, you can recite this verse from the noble Qur'an:

﴿ فَلَا تَعْلَمُ نَفْسٌ مَّا أُخْفِيَ لَهُمْ مِنْ قَرَّةٍ أَعْيُنٍ جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴾

(سورة سجدة: الآية ١٧)



﴿No person knows what is kept hidden for them of joy as a reward for what they used to do.﴾ (Quran 32: 17) » (Bukhari)

Allah has given us many detailed descriptions of paradise:

﴿ مَثَلُ الْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي وُعدَ الْمُتَّقُونَ فِيهَا أَنْهَارٌ مِنْ مَاءٍ غَيْرِ آسِنٍ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ لَبَنٍ لَمْ يَتَغَيَّرَ طَعْمُهُ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ خَمْرٍ لَذَّةٍ لِلشَّارِبِينَ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ عَسَلٍ مُصَفًّى وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ ... ﴾

(سورة محمد: الآية ١٥)

﴿The description of paradise which the pious have been promised [is that] in it are rivers of water, the taste and smell of which are not changed; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine delicious to those who drink; and rivers of clarified honey [clear and pure]. Therein for them is every kind of fruit, and forgiveness from their Lord...﴾ (Qur'an 47: 15)

﴿ وَجَزَاهُمْ بِمَا صَبَرُوا جَنَّةً وَحَرِيرًا ۚ مُتَّكِئِينَ فِيهَا عَلَى الْأَرَائِكِ لَا يَرَوْنَ فِيهَا شَمْسًا وَلَا زَمَهْرِيرًا ۚ وَدَانِيَةً عَلَيْهِمْ ظِلَالُهَا وَذُلَّتْ أَفْطُوفُهَا تَذْلِيلًا ۚ وَيُطَافُ عَلَيْهِمْ بِآيَةٍ مِنْ فِضَّةٍ وَأَكْوَابٍ كَانَتْ قَوَارِيرًا ۚ قَوَارِيرٍ مِنْ فِضَّةٍ قَدَّرُوهَا تَقْدِيرًا ۚ وَيُسْقَوْنَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا كَانَ مِزَاجُهَا زَنْجَبِيلًا ۚ عَيْنًا فِيهَا تُسَمَّى سَلْسَبِيلًا ۚ وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَانٌ مُخَلَّدُونَ إِذَا رَأَيْتَهُمْ حَسِبْتَهُمْ لُؤْلُؤًا مَنثورًا ۚ وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَ ثَمَّ رَأَيْتَ نَعِيمًا وَمُلْكًا كَبِيرًا ۚ عَلَيْهِمْ ثِيَابٌ سُنْدُسٍ ۚ ﴾

خُضِرَ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٌ وَخُلُوا أَسَاوِرَ مِنْ فِضَّةٍ وَسَقَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ شَرَابًا طَهُورًا
(سورة دهر: الآية ١٢-٢١) ﴿n﴾

﴿And their recompense shall be paradise, and silken garments, because they were patient. Reclining therein on raised thrones, they will see there neither the excessive heat of the sun, nor the excessive bitter cold. And the shade thereof is close upon them, and the bunches of fruit thereof will hang low within their reach. And among them will be passed round vessels of silver and cups of crystal, crystal-clear, made of silver. They will determine the measure thereof [according to their wishes]. And they will be given to drink there of a cup [of wine] mixed with ginger, a spring there called *Salsabeel*, and round about them will [serve] boys of everlasting youth. If you saw them, you would think them scattered pearls. And when you look there [in paradise], you will see a delight [that cannot be imagined], and a great dominion. Upon them will be green garments of fine and thick silk. They will be adorned with bracelets of silver, and their Lord will give them a pure drink.﴾

(Qur'an 76: 12-21)

Correct beliefs and good deeds in this life guarantee a successful Judgement Day. Allah's reward will be a place in paradise for eternity. The good deeds you performed will determine in which level of paradise you will dwell. In the very lowest level of paradise, there are rewards equivalent to ten times that of the best treasures found anywhere on this earth.

Allah created humans so that we would worship Him. In the past, He sent many prophets to deliver to the people a message: to worship Allah only. Allah sent us a set of rules to abide by, guiding us and ensuring that we would live respectful and righteous lives. Some people choose to accept the message and worship Allah, while others choose not to.

There is a hidden reward that Allah (ﷻ) gives to a fasting Muslim, and no one but Allah knows what this reward is. (In other words, the reward for fasting is not calculated like that of other good deeds.) The following hadith explains the joy and the pleasure that is felt on two occasions:

Abu Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) narrated that Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said:

« Allah said: All the deeds of the children of Adam (humankind) are for them, except fasting, which is for Me, and I will give the reward for it. Fasting is a shield or protection from the fire and from committing sins. If one of you is fasting, he should avoid sexual relations with his wife and quarrelling; if someone should fight or quarrel with him, he should say: I am fasting. By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, the unpleasant smell coming from the mouth of a fasting person is better in the sight of Allah than the smell of musk. There are two pleasures for the fasting person: one at the time of breaking his fast, and the other at the time when he meets his Lord; then he will be pleased because of his fasting. » (Bukhari)

« Sahl ibn Sa'd narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: Paradise has eight gates, and one of them is called *ar-Rayyân*, through which none will enter except those who observe fasting. The Prophet also said: If a person spends two different kinds of something (for Allah's cause), he will be called from the gates of paradise. » (Bukhari)

Abu Hurayrah narrated that Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said:

« Whoever observes fasts during the month of Ramadan out of sincere faith, hoping to attain Allah's rewards, will have all his past sins forgiven. » (Bukhari)

Practicing Islam day to day gives me a good feeling inside. I feel at peace, with a sense of Allah being close by. I have noticed a big change; after witnessing great wealth and appalling poverty on

my travels, it is evident that whether people are rich or poor, all are getting through this life with just the necessities: food, water, sleep, health, shelter, clothes, love and family. Luxuries and comforts do have a purpose, but they do not bring continued happiness or meaningfulness to life.

Allah gives meaning and purpose to life, and this in turn automatically brings happiness.

An awakened consciousness will open the floodgates, and Allah (ﷻ) will literally come pouring into your life.

When I was a Christian, I thought of God often, but I wondered many times if what I was doing was correct or even healthy. I asked myself, “Is it right to be thinking of God and religion so much?” I did not understand, and I felt that the Bible did not guide me enough. Usually I would force such thoughts out of my mind and get back to thinking about the tangible things in the life around me. What I realise now as a Muslim is that it is 100% correct and vitally important to be thinking of Allah as much as possible throughout each and every day.

I feel happy that the call to prayer in itself encourages me to think of and pray to Allah five times a day. I like the way that my day is not just one period from light until dark. It is now segmented into the morning’s first light, midday, mid-afternoon, early evening and night – each of which comes with Allah’s call to prayer to remember Him, stand before Him and worship Him.

Abu Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) narrated that Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ) said:

« If the people knew the reward for pronouncing the call to prayer and for standing in the first row (in congregational prayers), and they found no other way to get that except by drawing lots, then they would draw lots. If they knew the reward for the noon prayer (in the early moments of its stated time), they would race for it (come early), and if they knew the reward of evening and dawn prayers in

congregation, they would come to offer them even if they had to crawl. » (Bukhari)

Being a Muslim however, does not make one exempt from this world's troubles and hardships. From time to time, I experience suffering, and occasionally I think that Allah has forgotten me. I have yet to learn that He is always there, remembering me. Sometimes I find it hard to accept that events happen for a reason and that often the reason is not immediately clear to me. My struggles are very much helped by prayer. In times of difficulties, the actual physical act of praying gives me a feeling of seclusion from whatever problem is troubling me, with a sense of complete focus on Allah. The rewards and benefits gained from the private connection with Allah in prayer are almost indescribable.

﴿ فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ۖ إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ۖ ﴾

(سورة انشراح: الآية ٥-٦)

﴿Verily, along with every hardship is relief; verily, along with every hardship is relief.﴾ (Qur'an 94: 5-6)

Words cannot really do any justice at all to the wonderful miracles that we have around us. Whether they are manmade or natural, Allah has provided absolutely all things for us, and He will continue to provide things that are yet to come. He has given us food, water, air, land, thoughts and feelings; everything is in abundance. From the most beautiful plants to the most feared insects, from the humble pencil to the incredible brain power given to us to invent technology that makes our lives easy and interesting... the list is endless. Allah also gave us His beautiful message, in the form of the Qur'an, guiding and helping all humanity in our everyday lives.

Before I became a Muslim, I had a suppressed fear of death and dying. I lived in a society where thinking and talking about death was very much taboo. What I have learned as a Muslim, and

especially by living among Muslims, is that many topics that touch on the subject of death are not feared at all. It is openly discussed that we will each die at some point, and that our time of death has already been written and is known to Allah (ﷻ). I now feel calm about the inevitable, with the knowledge that what I do with my time here on earth will ultimately determine the conditions of my afterlife.

Abu Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) narrated that Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said:

« The world is a prison for a believer and paradise for a nonbeliever. »
(Muslim)

When we step out of our lives for a moment and start to think about everything to do with life, most thinkers will come up with a never-ending supply of questions. The usual questions are: “Why are we here?”, “What are we doing as a human race?”, “What are we supposed to be doing?”, “Where are we going?”, “Where and when is the end?”, “Is there a God?”, and “Is there a heaven and a hell?”

The most wonderful thing about the Islamic religion with regards to our typical questions is that all the answers can be found in the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* [the practice and collected sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that together with the Qur'an forms the basis of Islamic law]. All we have to do as believers is to learn the facts from the Qur'an and the Sunnah and not waste time questioning things that we really do not have to worry about. I found this to be an enormous relief when I converted to Islam.

I spent many years reading so-called ‘self-help’ books in which I increasingly gained an interest. These were popular psychology books with titles like: *How to be Happy in Life*, *How to Live Your Life*, and *How to Think Yourself Rich*. I have made up these particular titles, but if you search the popular psychology section in a bookstore, you will find hundreds of these books. Many

of them try to describe to the reader a new way to think and a new way to live life.

In many cases, the writers of these books seriously claim that there is absolutely no god at all. I feel only sadness towards any such person who is a nonbeliever and tries to convince others that there is no god. I feel that they are missing out on the point of living this life, and most importantly on what is yet to come: the eternal life.

In many ways, these authors are somewhat clever with words and can seem quite convincing. They gain many followers when the book is popular, but we should be careful about what we read and what we allow our minds to accept.

If you are a true believer in Allah, no author can ever change your mind, no matter how strong an argument or statement he or she makes.

The Qur'an is the most important book for humankind, providing guidance on how to live life in the best way as an individual, a family and a community. Whether you are rich or poor, Islam ensures that you will live a decent life if you follow the religion by applying its teachings.

My story could have remained private, but after being a Muslim for almost four years, I believe that I have experienced, and continue to experience, the Islamic religion in a way that is not widely recorded. I want to share my story with others, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to describe my religious practices before and after converting to Islam, and to explain the reasons for turning my back on the Christian religion I once followed. I want to share the insights I gained when I came into contact with various other religions on my travels.

When I doubted my Christian religion, I felt adamant that suppressing such thoughts and not searching for the correct path was completely wrong. I strongly believed in gathering as much information as possible about as many of the world's religions as

I could identify, so that I could consider how applicable they were in my life and how their beliefs and practices agreed with what I already had inside my heart. My spiritual needs were met completely when I embraced Islam; I became happy and content.

If you need proof of Allah, you only need to open your eyes, look around, and look inside your heart, mind and soul.

If you search for Allah, He will come to you.

The appendices included at the back of this book provide a brief overview of Islamic facts, beliefs and other essentials of the religion, providing a starting point for further studies.

APPENDIX A

ISLAM QUICK REFERENCE⁹

There is so much to learn about Islam that the ongoing studies and practices can completely fill a Muslim's time. Islam literally is 'a way of life', guiding Muslims through every part of their day. There are many books that go into great detail about all aspects of Islam; here I have outlined a selection of subjects, briefly describing the main points here.

Islam is built on **five obligatory pillars**:

- **Shahâdah** (the declaration of faith)
- **Ṣalâh** (the five daily formal prayers)
- **Zakâh** (obligatory charity)
- **Fasting** (the month of Ramadan)
- **Hajj** (the major pilgrimage to the Sacred Mosque, site of the Kaaba in Makkah, to be undertaken by every able Muslim once in his/her lifetime)

⁹ Please note that the information given in these two appendices is based on my understanding of basic Islamic concepts and my attempts to succinctly summarise them, and any mistakes are my own. They provide only a very basic introduction to these issues; for more details, please consult a reliable source on Islamic teachings and law. (Author)

To be a Muslim, one must believe in the **six articles of faith**:

1. Belief in Allah (ﷻ)
2. Belief in angels
3. Belief in the books of Allah
4. Belief in the prophets of Allah
5. Belief in the Day of Judgement
6. Belief in the divine will and decree

What is Islam?

In the Arabic language, Islam translates to ‘submission’ (to Allah).¹⁰ Islam is the final religion that Allah sent for humanity, the Qur’an is the last divine scripture, and Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is the last and final messenger sent by Allah. Allah’s previous messengers were all sent to call their people to the same religion. Muslims believe that submission to Allah alone, by believing in Him and obeying His orders, is the only way to achieve success in this life and the hereafter. True Islam comes directly from the Qur’an and the Sunnah, not from the cultural practices or traditions of Muslims.

Who is Allah (ﷻ)?

Allah is the One and Only in Islam. He is the Creator of everything: humans, animals, the sky, mountains, rain, and the universe as a whole – everything without exception. Allah is the centre of the Islamic religion, and the purpose of a Muslim is to worship Him alone with no partners.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was born in Makkah in 570 CE. He was the successor to Jesus (ﷺ), and Jesus preached of his coming as it

¹⁰ The word ‘Islam’ is also related to the word *salâm*, meaning peace. (Editor)

has been mentioned in the Qur'an. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) found sanctuary in the mountains surrounding Makkah, where he used to go to meditate. At the age of forty, he received his first revelation from Allah, through the angel Gabriel (جبرائيل). He continued to receive revelations until his death in 632 CE, and these revelations formed the verses of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an is the final divine scripture sent to humankind. The Qur'an was revealed from Allah, through the angel Gabriel, to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) over a period of approximately twenty-three years. Allah's message was sent for the benefit of all humankind. It contains laws, ethics, morals and teachings on how to be merciful to each other.

﴿ إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا ﴾
(سورة بني إسرائيل: الآية ٩)

﴿Verily, this Qur'an guides to that which is most just and right and gives glad tidings to the believers [in the oneness of Allah and His Messenger, Muhammad], who work deeds of righteousness, that they shall have a great reward [paradise].﴾ (Qur'an 17: 9)

Muslims worship Allah by reciting the Qur'an during and outside of the prayer. The Qur'an is Allah's foundation for human beings, covering all aspects of life. It defines the ways we can connect with Allah as well as the way we establish relationships with each other in order to live a righteous life. The Qur'an includes many scientific facts that scientists only now are able to understand and prove to be accurate through research. Before reading the Qur'an, one must perform ablutions to be in a state of ritual purity. Allah promised to save the Qur'an from any kind of corruption; since it was written, no character has been changed, added, or taken away. It is still the

original message that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) 1400 years ago.

The Qur'an consists of 114 soorahs, or chapters; the opening soorah is *al-Fâtiḥah*, and the last is *an-Nâs*. Each soorah is made up of verses; the longest is *al-Baqarah* (the Cow), with 286 verses, and the shortest is *al-Kawthar*, with just three verses. The Qur'an has also been divided into thirty sections.¹¹

﴿وَإِذَا قُرِئَ الْقُرْآنُ فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ وَأَنْصِتُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ﴾

(سورة الأعراف: الآية ٢٠٤)

﴿So when the Qur'an is recited, listen to it and be silent, that you may receive mercy.﴾ (Qur'an 7: 204)

﴿قُلْ لِّئِنْ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَى أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا﴾

(سورة بني إسرائيل: الآية ٨٨)

﴿If the humankind and the jinn were together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they helped one another.﴾ (Qur'an 17: 88)

The Sunnah and Hadith

The Sunnah, which comprises the lifestyle of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), is a component of Islamic law, along with the Qur'an. In the Hadith, we have detailed information about the things he said, his actions, and the actions of others which he approved. There are two

¹¹ This division into thirty parts, which are roughly equal, is to make it convenient for one to complete its recitation in a month (by reciting one section a day). These sections are then divided further, into halves, which are in turn divided into quarters. The Qur'an has also been divided into seven parts for those who would like to complete it in one week. (Editor)

types of hadiths; the most common are reports of the sayings, actions or approvals of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), as narrated by his fellow Muslims. In these accounts, he provided answers about people's problems or situations and helped by giving judgements where necessary. The second type is called *hadith qudsi*; these sayings, in meaning if not exact wording, were communicated to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) by Allah (ﷻ), but they are not part of the Qur'an.

A sample of hadiths

« 'Abdullâh ibn 'Amr (رضي الله عنه) narrated that a man asked the Prophet (ﷺ): What sort of deeds (or what qualities) of Islam are good? The Prophet (ﷺ) replied: To feed (the poor) and to greet those whom you know and those whom you do not know. » (Bukhari)

Abu Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said:

« If someone eats or drinks forgetfully, he should complete his fast, for what he has eaten or drunk has been given to him by Allah. » (Bukhari)

'Uthman (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said:

« The best among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it. » (Bukhari)

Abu Hurayrah narrated that Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said:

« During your sleep, Satan ties three knots at the back of the head of each one of you. On every knot, he reads and exhales the following words: The night is long for you, so stay asleep. When you wake up and remember Allah, one knot is undone. When you perform ablution, the second knot is undone. When you offer ṣalâh, the third knot is undone, and you get up energetically, in a good mood and with a good heart in the morning. Otherwise, you get up in a bad mood, feeling lethargic (and without a good heart). » (Bukhari)

Sharia

Sharia is the Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It helps Muslims to achieve good relationships with Allah, themselves and others. Islamic Sharia covers all aspects of our daily life, including the inheritance system, social etiquette, legal and political matters, financial issues, and so on.

Prayer

The following is a transliteration and translation of the first call to prayer, which is called out from mosques at the appointed times:

- ***Allâhu akbar, Allâhu akbar (2 times)***
(Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest)
- ***Ash-hadu al lâ ilâha illâ Allâh (2 times)***
(I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship other than Allah)
- ***Ash-hadu anna Muḥammadar rasoolullâh (2 times)***
(I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah)
- ***Ḥayya 'alaṣ-ṣalâh (2 times)***
(Come towards prayer)
- ***Ḥayya 'alal-falâḥ (2 times)***
(Come towards success and prosperity)¹²
- ***Allâhu akbar, Allâhu akbar***
(Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest)
- ***Lâ ilâha illâ Allâh***
(There is none worthy of worship other than Allah)

¹² For the dawn prayer only, this statement is said twice at this point: *Aṣ-ṣalâtu khayru min an-nawm* (Prayer is better than sleep).

The first call is to announce that it is time for prayers and that people should gather in the mosque. The second call is made a short time later to announce that the prayer is about to begin:

- ***Allâhu akbar Allâhu akbar***
(Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest)
- ***Ash-hadu al lâ ilâha illâ Allâh***
(I bear witness that none has the right to be worshiped except Allah alone)
- ***Ash-hadu anna Muḥammadar rasoolullâh***
(I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah)
- ***Ḥayya ‘alaṣ-ṣalâh***
(Come towards prayer)
- ***Ḥayya ‘alal-falâḥ***
(Come towards success and prosperity)
- ***Qadi qâmat aṣ-Ṣalâh (2 times)***
(The prayer is now beginning)
- ***Allâhu akbar, Allâhu akbar***
(Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest)
- ***Lâ ilâha illâ Allâh***
(None has the right to be worshiped but Allah)

Before offering prayer, one must perform an ablution to fulfil the condition of purity. Certain parts of the body are washed, in the following sequence:¹³

1. Wash the hands three times.
2. Rinse the mouth with water three times.

¹³ This is only a very basic description of the ablution. Please consult reliable Islamic law resources for a more detailed description, including the specifics of which actions are mandatory and which are only recommended. For example, see: <http://www.islam-qa.com/en/ref/11497/description%20of%20wudoo>.

3. Clean the nostrils by sniffing in and blowing out water three times.
4. Wash the face three times with both hands.
5. Wash the right arm, up to the elbow, three times.
6. Wash the left arm, up to the elbow, three times.
7. Wipe over the head once with wet hands.
8. With wet hands, wipe the inner area of the ears with the forefinger while wiping the outer side with the thumbs.
9. Wash the right foot, up to the ankle, three times.
10. Wash the left foot, up to the ankle, three times.

If you have no access to water, you can substitute with soil to perform a symbolic dry ablution. Strike the ground once with the palms of the hands; wipe the back of the right hand with the palm of the left, and the back of the left hand with the palm of the right, then wipe the face with both hands.

A complete ablution involves washing the whole body. It is required after sexual intercourse or any emission of sexual fluids, and at the end of the menstrual period or postpartum bleeding.

The following is the first soorah of the Qur'an, *al-Fâtiḥah* (The Opening), which all Muslims recite in their daily prayers.

- ***Bismillâhir-Raḥmânir-Raḥeem***

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

- ***Alḥamdulillâhi rabbil-'âlameen***

All the praises and thanks be to Allah, Lord of the worlds.

- ***ar-Raḥmânir-Raḥeem***

The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

- ***Mâliki yawm id-deen***

Owner of the day of recompense.

- ***Iyyâka na‘budu wa iyyâka nasta‘een***
You Alone we worship, and You Alone we ask for help for each and everything.
- ***Ihdinaş-şirâţ al-mustaqeem***
Guide us to the straight path.
- ***Şirâţ al-ladheena an‘amta ‘alayhim, ghayril-maghđoobi ‘alayhim wa lađâlleen***
The path of those on whom You have bestowed Your grace, not [the path] of those who earned Your anger, nor of those who go astray.

A mosque (*masjid* in Arabic) is a place dedicated for Islamic worship. No shoes are allowed in the prayer hall, and men and women pray separately; either the women make rows behind the men or they pray in a separate room or area. Someone is appointed to call to prayer, and the imam leads the prayer.

Fasting

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic year,¹⁴ and all Muslims must fast for the complete month.¹⁵ Fasting means refraining from eating, drinking, sexual intercourse and smoking throughout the day, between dawn and sunset. Fasting can be thought of as an aid in the development of a person’s spirit; it is done to increase our piety and God-consciousness, and to please Allah. It is simply between an individual and Allah (ﷻ), and only He knows if one is truly fasting. There are many lessons to be learned from fasting, including:

¹⁴ The Islamic calendar is based on lunar months, so Ramadan moves across the seasons, coming about eleven days earlier each year in the Gregorian calendar. (Editor)

¹⁵ There are exceptions for children, the insane, travelers, those who are ill, and pregnant and breastfeeding women if they or their babies would be harmed. Consult a reliable source for details of the Islamic rulings. (Editor)

Knowledge – For one who has practiced and experienced fasting, giving charity to the poor is done with firsthand knowledge of the feelings of hunger and thirst.

Patience – Carrying out one's normal daily activities while abstaining from food and drink requires patience.

Honesty – One demonstrates honesty by maintaining the fast when it could easily be broken while no one (except Allah, of course) is watching.

Awareness – Awareness and fear of Allah (ﷻ) are heightened in Ramadan, when a more conscious effort is made to remember Him and to strengthen one's connection with Him by increasing good deeds.

Hajj

One of the five pillars of Islam is the annual pilgrimage to Makkah, when millions of Muslims from around the world gather in response to the call from Allah. All Muslims who are able are obliged to perform the Hajj once in their lifetime. The Hajj is performed annually during the Islamic month of Dhul-Hijjah, in the area of the holiest place in Islam: Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

Participating in the Hajj brings together Muslims of all nationalities, races and classes, all performing the same rites prescribed by Allah. Many of these rites are associated with the Prophet Abraham (ﷺ), whom Allah ordered to call humankind to Hajj.

On completing the Hajj, Muslims have usually gained many spiritually and physically enriching qualities, the most obvious being a strengthening of their devotion to Allah.

The Hajj rituals take less than a week, but many pilgrims stay much longer in order to perform the minor pilgrimage and to visit nearby relevant sites such as the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah.

The Saudi Arabian government reported that 2,789,399 Muslims performed the Hajj in 2010.¹⁶

Hijab

There are parts of the body that Allah forbids men and women from exposing publicly. A man should cover, at a bare minimum, the area from the navel to the knees. He is not permitted to wear gold or any clothing made from silk.

In general, when a woman is around men who are not close, unmarried relatives, she should not expose any part of her body except her face and hands, and her clothing should not be transparent or tight enough to reveal her shape. Women are regarded as precious in Islam, and no men outside her unmarried relatives should see her hair or other parts that are considered private.

Paradise

Allah (ﷻ) has created paradise as a reward for his true believers; He has saved all kinds of pleasures for them, to serve as a reward for their good deeds during this life. Paradise has levels, and people of higher levels will enjoy greater pleasures than the people below them; this all depends on our deeds in this life. Allah has said about paradise:

﴿ فَلَا تَعْلَمُ تَفْسٌ مَا أُخْفِيَ لَهُمْ مِنْ قُرَّةِ أَعْيُنٍ جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴾
(سورة سجدة: الآية ١٧)



﴿No person knows what is kept hidden for them of joy as a reward for what they used to do.﴾
(Qur'an 32: 17)

¹⁶ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Central Dept of Statistics and Information

APPENDIX B

THE NEW MUSLIM

If you are considering becoming a Muslim and embracing the Islamic faith, the religion itself will be in your heart, mind and soul. You will know when the exact point has come, and that it is the correct path to take. Here I have set out some helpful points to be considered by new Muslims.

The five pillars of Islam need to be incorporated into your daily life. After putting into practice the obligatory acts, you should both learn and practice as much as possible from the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

A wealth of valuable information can be found on the Internet and in books, at mosques and Islamic centres, and from fellow Muslims.

Pillar of Islam	Steps to Take
Shahâdah (declaration of faith)	Recite the declaration of faith. (See the chapter on Islam.)
Ṣalâh (prayers)	Offer prayers five times a day. (See the table of prayer timings below.)
Fasting	Abstain from food, water, sexual intercourse and smoking from dawn until dusk every day in the month of Ramadan.
Hajj (pilgrimage)	Travel to Makkah to perform the Hajj at least once in your lifetime, if you are healthy, sane and financially able to do so.
Zakâh	Give an annual monetary contribution (at a rate of 2.5% of accumulated wealth) ¹⁷ either directly to individuals or to an organisation that collects and distributes it (to individuals or organisations in eligible categories as stated in the Qur'an; the main categories are the underprivileged and those in need).

¹⁷ In general, zakât is calculated as 2.5% of assets, but there are various conditions and requirements depending on the type of assets, how long they have been held, etc. Please consult a reliable resource for the specifics.
(Editor)

Mandatory Prayers (Ṣalâh)

Arabic Prayer Name	Prayer Times	Units of prayer (repetitions)
(1) <i>Fajr</i>	Dawn, before sunrise	2
(2) <i>Dhuhr</i>	Early afternoon	4
(3) 'Aṣr	Mid-afternoon	4
(4) <i>Maghrib</i>	Sunset	3
(5) 'Ishâ'	Evening, after nightfall	4

Helpful points to consider:

- (ALLAH) Pray to Allah to ask for help and guidance while adjusting to the Islamic religion and a new way of life.
- (SHAHÂDAH) Reciting the declaration of faith in your mother tongue is necessary to make sure that you understand it clearly. You should also make a wholehearted attempt to recite the shahâdah in Arabic afterwards.
- (PRAYING) Upon converting to Islam, you should not delay praying if you can avoid it. While learning how to pray, even attempting to pray is better than not praying at all.
- (PRAYING) In non-Islamic countries (such as the United Kingdom and United States), there are fewer mosques, and the mosques may not be permitted to announce the call to prayer. It is therefore a little harder to know when it is time to pray, and there is no reminder to actually go to pray. You can obtain a list of prayer times from any mosque or from the

Internet.¹⁸ You will also need to determine the direction of Makkah so as to conduct prayers facing the direction of the Kaaba.

- (MOSQUE) Learn the Arabic words and phrases used by the imam leading the prayer in a mosque, so that you can better understand and follow the congregational prayer.
- (MOSQUE) Visit a mosque for prayer whenever possible, especially for the Friday congregational prayer.
- (FASTING) Mental and physical preparations are required before the fasting month of Ramadan arrives. A new Muslim who has no prior fasting experience may need to take a gentle approach to fasting. He or she might begin practicing before Ramadan begins, by fasting, for example, half a day per week, progressing gradually to the complete period from dawn until dusk until a few days in succession can be achieved.
- (QUR'AN) Obtain a translated version of the Qur'an which has the original Arabic script included. Reading a translated version of the Qur'an is not the same as reading it in Arabic, the language in which it was sent to humankind. The translated version is a vital tool for the non-Arabic speaker, but keep in mind that it is not the Qur'an itself. It uses the closest explanatory words possible throughout, but it cannot be identical. Arabic has its own unique sounds and meanings, which cannot be matched by any other language.
- (QUR'AN) Learn the Arabic alphabet's sounds and shapes, which will enable you to read the Qur'an in Arabic.

¹⁸ There are also software programs available for computers, phones and personal electronic devices, which announce the call to prayer at the correct times. (Editor)

- (HAJJ) Prepare mentally and physically for the Hajj. Pilgrims need to be reasonably fit and healthy because a great deal of walking is required, often in very hot, dry conditions. A considerable amount of knowledge is required about the path taken for performing the Hajj and its significance within the Islamic religion.
- (ARABIC LANGUAGE) Aim to learn at least some basic Arabic words, phrases and general conversational skills so that you can interact with other Muslims and pilgrims, which will greatly enhance the Hajj experience.
- (HAJJ) Preparations for Hajj include checking the Saudi Arabian Embassy website for terms and conditions of the Hajj application process. This includes the required vaccinations and the requirements for women to be accompanied by eligible male relatives. The Ministry of Hajj website (www.hajjinformation.com) is a valuable source of information concerning the necessary Hajj steps and making the required preparations.
- (HAJJ) If your passport does not state your religion, you will need to prove that you are a Muslim by showing a certificate stating that you have converted to Islam. In non-Muslim countries, this can be obtained from an Islamic Centre; in Muslim countries, it may be through the ministry responsible for religious affairs.
- (HAJJ) The Saudi Arabian authorities allocate a limited number of Hajj visas per country, in order to limit and control the number of pilgrims who can be safely accommodated.
- (HAJJ) Some pilgrims find it more convenient to use an authorised Hajj travel agent, who will arrange group travel and all the necessities such as transportation, hotels and visas. A list of authorised agents can be found on the Ministry of Hajj website: www.hajjinformation.com.

- (ZAKÂH) If a Muslim's wealth does not reach a minimum threshold, then no zakât is required. Of course, voluntary charity is always encouraged, and one may give whatever he or she can afford. Kindness to others, good deeds, and even smiles are also regarded as acts of charity.

GLOSSARY OF ISLAMIC TERMS*

<i>abu</i> (or <i>abi</i>)	أبو، أبي	father (of)
<i>alḥamdulillâh</i>	الحمد لله	all praise is for Allah
<i>Allâhu akbar</i>	الله أكبر	Allah is the Greatest
<i>‘aṣr</i>	عصر	mid-afternoon; the obligatory prayer at that time
<i>bismillâh</i>	بسم الله	in the name of Allah
<i><u>dh</u>uhr</i>	ظهر	afternoon; the obligatory prayer at that time
<i>fajr</i>	فجر	dawn; the obligatory prayer at that time
Hadith (<i>Ḥadeeth</i>)	حديث	the collected statements and actions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that with the Qur’an form the basis of Islamic law

* The Arabic words are transliterated according to the conventions of the Transliteration Chart found in this book. If a word has become part of the English language (i.e., is found in a dictionary of Standard English), that spelling is used in this book and appears first in this Glossary, with the transliterated form in brackets after it.

hadith (<i>ḥadeeth</i>)	حديث	a statement or action of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that was remembered and recorded by his Companions and followers
<i>hadith qudsi</i>	حديث قدسي	‘sacred hadith’; a hadith communicated to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) by Allah, but that is not part of the Qur’an
Hajj (<i>hajj</i>)	حج	the major pilgrimage to the Sacred Mosque, site of the Ka‘bah at Makkah, to be undertaken by every able Muslim once in his/her lifetime
hijab (<i>ḥijāb</i>)	حجاب	veil ordained by Allah for believing women
‘ <i>ishā</i> ’	عشاء	evening; the obligatory prayer at that time
<i>jinn</i> (pl. of <i>jinni</i>)	جن	non-human, rational beings created by Allah from fire, often referred to as ‘demons’ or ‘devils’; They have free will like humans: some are Muslims, others disbelievers; some are obedient to Allah, others disobedient. Satan is a jinni. Some people try to ‘foretell’ the future by contacting a jinni. Some disobedient jinn mislead people into thinking that they can tell them what will happen in the future, near or far,

or that the jinn can provide people with riches or some sort of power.

Kaaba
(*Ka'bah*)

كعبة

the House of Allah in Makkah, originally built by Prophets Abraham and Ishmael, which Muslims face wherever they pray

*lâ ilâha illâ
Allâh*

لا إله إلا الله

there is none worthy of worship other than Allah

maghrib

مغرب

sunset; the obligatory prayer at that time

masjid

مسجد

lit. a place of prostration; a mosque

Qur'an
(*Qur'ân*)

قرآن

lit. recitation; the eternal word of Allah (ﷻ) as revealed in Arabic to His final Messenger Muhammad (ﷺ) through the angel Gabriel, beginning in the month of Ramadan in the year 610 CE and continuing over twenty-three years. Allah has promised to preserve it, and it has never changed; copies of the Qur'an found anywhere today are the same as copies throughout the world and throughout the centuries. (Translations into other languages are considered to be interpretations and do not have the same status.) Comprising 114 chapters with 6,346 verses,

it has been memorized – in whole or in part – by Muslims ever since it was first revealed. As the final message for all of humankind, it supersedes all previous divine revelations and serves as the basis for Islamic beliefs and practices.

Ramadan (<i>Ramaḍân</i>)	رمضان	the ninth month in the Islamic calendar; the month of obligatory fasting; the month in which the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed
<i>ṣalâh</i> or <i>ṣalât</i>	صلاة	formal prayer: a combination of physical postures, recitation and supplication
<i>shahâdah</i>	الشهادة	testimony, <i>usu.</i> the statement <i>lâ ilâha illâ Allâh, Muḥammadun rasool Ullâh</i> [There is none worthy of worship other than God (Allah); Muhammad is the Messenger of God]
Sharia (<i>shari'ah</i>)	شريعة	Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah
<i>soorah</i> or <i>soorat</i>	سورة	chapter of the Qur'an
<i>Sunnah</i>	سنة	the practice and collected sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that together with the Qur'an forms the basis of Islamic law

zakâh or zakât

زكاة obligatory charity: an ‘alms tax’
on wealth payable by Muslims
and to be distributed to other
Muslims who qualify as recipients